University of Alberta

Everysecondweekend

by

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Everysecondweekend

When I was in Grade Three, they started teaching religion classes at my school. An hour before lunch every Friday, the Catholic kids would go to the library and the Protestant kids would stay in the classroom. I kind of liked religion classes. Mostly, we just sat around in a circle on the floor while the pastor told stories from the Bible. My parents never went to church, so I had never heard most of those stories, and sometimes I'd go home and tell them to my mom.

My favourite story was about a baby. Two different people wanted the baby, and a man was going to cut it in two, but one of the people who wanted it said, *Stop! Don't cut it in two, give it to the other lady instead.* She's the one that got the baby. When I told that story to my Mom, she said, *Well, at least there was no custody hearing.*

The same year that I started having religion classes every Friday, my father came back from wherever it was he'd been in the four years since my brother had been born. He bought a house and land some thirty miles out of town. It was in the elbow of a pine forest that stretched twenty miles in each direction.

My Mom wouldn't even go out to see the house.

"It's great, Liz. It's a log cabin. There's a big stone fireplace that forms the entire north wall. Try it, Lizzie. For me."

Years later, when I was in university, Mom told me that even if she had been willing to live three miles from any neighbours and thirty miles from a store or a movie theatre or a school, it was those four years my father had been gone that kept her in town.

"You can't just go away and expect nothing to have changed by the time you decide to return."

Her back was to me when she said that. She sounded so sad, but when she turned around a moment later, her lips were drawn tight and her eyes were flat and annoyed, like they always were when she talked about my dad. Then the muscles in her face relaxed, and she dropped her gaze.

"What was it like?" she asked softly.

"What do you mean?" I was surprised by her hesitant tone, by the way she was running her finger nervously along the rim of the counter.

She flicked her eyes back up, the edgy annoyance returning to her features. "Never mind," she said. "Knowing your father, I can just imagine."

When I was eight, I asked the pastor if the words "joint custody" came from the Bible. I specifically told him to look at the part where the baby was going to be cut in two. He said he was sure they didn't, and would I like to start going to Sunday school with his children? I told him I couldn't, because of the weekends I spent with my Dad, too far out of town to drive in just for Sunday school.

Around the same time, everysecondweekend became a code word in our house. It meant that my Mom would cry a little and blame it on hay fever, and my brother would cry a lot, and I would get angry because I wasn't allowed to bring my favourite toys.

"You'll only lose them or get them dirty, Kate. Leave them here, and you can play with them when you get back."

How could I explain to her that sometimes I felt that I was never coming back? That a weekend seemed like a whole year out there? That my brother and I were never allowed to leave the scrubby patch of grass in front of the house in case we got lost in that forest? That there was no television, and the radio only worked on cloudy days and sometimes it was so quiet that that it felt as though the house wasn't touching anything at all—not the trees, not the sky, not the air, not even the scrubby ground outside. I didn't know how to explain all that to her, so I cried and said it wasn't fair. "There's nothing to do! If I had my bike, at least I'd have something to do!"

"Tell that to your father. Besides, if you spent all weekend on your bike, what would your brother do?"

I looked doubtfully at my little brother then, wondering if it would make any difference to him whether I was around to amuse him or not.

"He just cries all weekend anyway, Mom."

"Tell that to your father."

Everysecondweekend did always seem to last about a year, but there was one weekend that I thought we weren't going back to town at all this time. It was late spring, and I was nine years old. It was warm and sunny, but summer holidays hadn't started yet. The radio fizzed like pop that's been poured too fast, and I started to feel like the house had lifted itself two feet off the ground.

"Why don't we go outside to play, Michael?" My brother was still crying a little. He hadn't stopped since we pulled away from our Mom's. He had a yellowish crust between his nose and his lip that no one had bothered to wipe away.

"Don' wanna!" He pushed his face into the cushions of the old couch and sobbed.

"C'mon," I said gruffly, pulling at his sticky hand.

I was building a Lego mansion next to the big puddle that Dad said was going to be a flower bed some day. The puddle was supposed to be a private lake for the people that lived in the mansion. I didn't like to play alone, though, and if Michael was crying, well—at least it was noise.

He must have found something he liked doing, because the noisy sobs soon turned into the sloppy-breathing sound of someone who needs to blow his nose. Finally, he was quiet, and I looked up from my castle to see if he wanted to help. He wasn't playing in the old wagon wheel where I left him, and I got up to see if he'd gone around to the other side of the house.

"Michael," I called, angry that he would leave me alone. "Michael!"

He didn't answer, so I kept walking around the house, calling his name. I didn't know what else to do, since we weren't allowed to go into the forest or down the long driveway that led to the road.

Finally, my father came back from wherever it was that he'd been since breakfast. He asked where Michael was, and when I told him I didn't know, he got very pale. "Michael!" he called, and his voice was so loud that I thought the trees shook from it. He tried calling a few more times, then looked at me. He didn't seem to know what to do

any more than I did. His expression was bewildered and a little afraid and it frightened me.

"You just stay here. Stay right here. I'm driving to the neighbours'. I'll only be gone a minute. Say right here and keep calling your brother."

"What do I do if he comes back?"

"Take him in the house and wait for me."

My father climbed into his truck, nodding at me to start calling before he drove away. "Mi-chael," I chanted uncertainly as I watched the dust from my father's tires disappear around the rim of the driveway to be inhaled by the trees. I called again, louder and louder. I yelled until my throat hurt, and that made me cry. I looked up at the tops of the pine trees. It seemed as though they were all bending towards me, like they were trying to touch me with their prickly tops, but I was too far down.

"Michael! Please, Michael!"

My father called those trees *evergreens*, but they weren't really green, they were grey-black, all the time. I remembered last Christmas, how we'd spent it out here for the first time. When Dad dropped us off at Mom's house the day before New Year's Eve, Mom and Michael and I pretended it was still Christmas, and we opened all our presents from her. The trees had seemed so much closer and so much blacker then, and you couldn't see the bottom of the house under the snow. I'd felt sure that the house really was floating off the ground a little, that the snow was hiding that awful gap between the logs and the frozen earth. Now I could see where the cabin touched the ground, and the great, grey trees were all bending toward me, trying to get closer. They had already reached Michael, I knew, and they were trying to get to me too.

Where was my father? He said he was going to the neighbours'. We'd never been inside the neighbours' house, but we always drove past it on the way to my father's, then again on Sunday afternoon when he drove us back into town. Maybe the trees were hiding him too. I sat down in the dirt and hid my face, so I wouldn't have to look at their prickly, black tops as they reached down for me.

"Katie! I told you to keep calling your brother!"

I looked up, frightened. My father was standing in front of his truck. A strange man and lady and an angry-looking teenage boy were getting out of a second truck that was much dustier than my father's. The man was wearing dirty jeans and a John Deere baseball cap, and the woman wasn't wearing any makeup. Mom always wore makeup when she left the house, and I stared at the neighbour woman's strangely bare face until she looked at me and smiled. I looked away, embarrassed. The boy had his hands in his pockets and he was looking up at the trees.

"Come on," my father said, pulling me up by the hand. "We're going to have to find your brother."

"I'll head north-west, you go south-west and Jamie can go north-east," the strange man said. "Janet can stay here in case the boy comes back on his own."

"What's his name?" the teenager asked.

My father looked at me. "Michael," he replied. He sounded embarrassed.

He pulled me by the hand and started to walk towards the edge of the trees. I was afraid, but I ran a little to keep up. "Keep calling," my father told me, and I did. I didn't tell him that my throat hurt or that I was tired.

Almost as soon as we stepped into the woods, they closed behind us. I looked back and couldn't see the house. I thought it smelled like cat pee and chewing gum, and the ground felt soft and spongy. I wondered if someone would have to come looking for us, then someone would come looking for them, until the woods had hidden everyone and there was no one left to come looking.

We walked and called for a long time. Every few minutes, I would have to run a few steps to keep up with my father. It was hard to walk on that mushy ground and my feet hurt from crunching up my toes, trying to keep my balance in shoes that were a little too small. My arms and legs were covered in red scratches.

I tried to watch my father's face as we walked. He was blinking his eyes hard, and every time he did, lines would appear at their corners and across the bridge of his nose, then disappear so completely that I would have to watch for the next blink to make sure that the old-looking lines were really there. I was looking at him when I tripped over a fallen tree that was mostly covered by dirt and dead pine needles. Dad caught my arm almost as soon as the tree snagged my foot, and I felt the sharp tug through my shoulders and neck as he kept me from falling.

"Careful," he said when my feet were settled on the spongy ground again. He looked at me for another convulsive blink, then started off again, his fingers still around my arm. They tightened a little for a moment every time I stepped, and I felt much safer. I tried to walk faster, to keep up with his long, quick strides.

"Stop," I said, when my feet hurt so much that I thought I was going to cry. I looked around. A dark, low bough dipped from one of the trees, touching the ground with its fingertip branches. Hide-and-seek, I thought. My father saw the branch too. He

ran two steps towards it, and reached under. His whole arm disappeared for a moment, then, like in a magic trick, he pulled my brother out. Michael's face was dark-grey like the trees, and the scratches on his arms and legs and neck were dirty-black and swollen. He was sleeping, and he looked as though the trees had coloured him—camouflage to hide him better. But we had found him.

My father carried him home, and made me hold on to his big jeans pocket so that I wouldn't get lost too. It was almost dark, and the ground seemed to be rising gently upwards so that the trees could reach us better. My father walked fast, and it was hard to keep up. He was holding on to Michael with both hands. I tripped, and a small twig dug itself into my knee. I pulled it out, trying not to cry, and a small red bead appeared where the twig had been.

"Keep walking, Katie," my father said, shifting my brother in his arms to pull me up. I kept walking. When we got back to the house, my father blasted the horn on his truck three times. My brother woke up and started crying. We went inside, and Michael had a bath while I drank hot chocolate that the lady named Janet had made. The spot where the twig had gone in turned dark brown, and it frightened me, because I knew that the trees were trying to camouflage me, too. I worried that there might still be a piece of tree in me.

Later, after the neighbours had gone home and Michael and I had gone to bed, I tiptoed across the dark bedroom floor to wake my brother up.

"Michael," I whispered. "Why did you go away?"

"I wanted to watch TV," he replied groggily. "MacGuyver's on."

"No, it isn't. MacGuyver's on Monday nights. Dad always takes us home on Sunday."

My brother shook his head. "No, MacGuyver's on tonight. I wanted to go to the neighbours' to watch it."

"Back to bed, Katie." My father's voice from the doorway startled me. I crawled into Michael's bed and pulled the covers up over my head. I couldn't see my father, but I knew he was standing in the doorway, standing over us and looking down. I waited until I heard his footsteps along the hall before I slipped out of Michael's bed and back into my own.

The next morning, my father woke us up early to drive us home. Before I got into the truck, I looked through the trees, trying to remember in which direction, exactly, my father and I had walked to find my brother. Finally, I climbed in next to Michael. No one spoke the whole ride into town.

My Mom ran out to meet the truck when we pulled up to the house. She hugged us hard, then stepped back to look at us for a long moment before shifting her gaze to my father. His hands were thrust into his pockets, and he was digging the toe of his boot into a little mound of dirt in the driveway. He avoided her gaze and glanced uneasily at us.

"They're all right," Dad said. "The scratches look worse than they are."

"Take your brother into the house, Katie," he said. I looked at my Mom. She nodded, her lips already pressed thin, and Michael and I went inside. They stayed outside for a long time. We could hear Mom yelling through the open kitchen window. Our father just stood there, looking down at her.

"Are you guys okay?" Mom asked after Dad had left.

I looked at Michael. He nodded without looking up. "Yeah," I said.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

I shook my head.

Mom reached out and took my hand, squeezing it. "Are you sure?" She was staring straight at me. It made me uneasy. I pulled my hand away.

"Yeah," I said again. Mom sat down at the kitchen table and pulled out her cigarettes.

"If you're sure."

After that, my brother wouldn't go with my father any more. And I wouldn't go without him. For a while, my father kept showing up everysecondweekend anyway, but we wouldn't get into the truck. Finally, he stopped trying. A few months later, the phone calls stopped too, and that Christmas there were no presents from him. Like before, he disappeared, faded away so softly that Michael and I hardly noticed.

Then, after more than a year, he came back again, my older half-brother Kent with him. The two of them were staying on a farm just outside of town, but away from the deep pine forests that still hid the old cabin. Dad started phoning. We knew it was him, even though Mom never passed the phone to us. We could tell by the edgy way her feet would shift when she picked it up.

"He's there if you want to see him," she said, drawing in a mouthful of cigarette smoke, her eyes flicking back and forth between us and the telephone. "It's up to you."

One day, when I was ten, Dad came to the door of Mom's house in town. He'd bought me a pony, he told me, and I could come out and ride it. I looked past him to the driveway, where my half-brother stood, lanky and silent. I recognized his face, but I couldn't remember the last time I had seen him. My father followed my gaze. "You two should start spending some time together," he said.

"Okay," I said, still looking at Kent. "I'll come."

My father didn't say anything about Michael. I didn't expect him to.

One of the first times I went to stay at my father's farm, Kent took me out into the field north of the house to teach me to ride my new pony. Dad said he had bought it for me and Michael, but Michael didn't even want to see the pony, so almost right away, it became *mine*. I didn't know how to climb on its back, and Kent had to lift me up into the saddle. He was holding the reins, and I wasn't really riding, just sitting there, holding on to the pony's mane and trying to keep my balance. He led us forward a few steps, and I almost slid off, so he stopped again and waited until I had squiggled back into a safe position. I held the pony's mane so tight that I was afraid I was hurting him.

"Kent?" I asked, "Don't walk, okay? Just stay here for a little while."

"Sure," he said. He stopped and wrapped the reins around his hand a couple of times, then stuffed his fists into his jacket pockets. His gaze wandered back towards the house. I relaxed a little then, and looked around the field. It was surrounded by papery birch trees. They were so far from us and small-looking that I felt like if I walked up to them, I could grab them in my fist, little white twigs sticking out between my fingers, and rip them up like weeds in my Mom's garden.

Kent shifted on his feet, and I worried that he was going to start walking again, so I tightened my fingers around the pony's mane. He didn't walk, though. Still holding the reins, he reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a squished-looking little cigarette and a match. The reins dangled in front of his mouth and his throat as he struck the match and lit the cigarette. A thin finger of smoke curled its way past his nose and eyes and towards my face. It smelled sweet and heavy, more like skunk than the cigarettes my Mom smoked. I coughed.

"That stinks!" I said.

A soft breath of wind fanned away the smoke, and Kent stuck the little cigarette between his lips, sucking at it. He looked at me and laughed, exhaling the smoke through his teeth.

Tss-sss-sss.

My father stayed nearly two years that time, before he drifted off again, and Kent drifted off with him.

"I'm sorry Katie," my Mom said. "You have to expect it." I watched her look over at Michael, who'd have been eight by then. His back was to us. We both knew he was listening. His foot was tapping nervously against the kitchen floor, and his neck was bent deliberately over his homework, which was spread across the kitchen table. A pencil was clutched in his hand, but I could see he had stopped writing.

Ashes

When I was twelve years old, my pony died. I hadn't ridden him in a few years—I don't think anybody had—but he was still *my pony*, who lived out on my dad's farm that I didn't visit anymore. I don't think my mom was planning on telling me. My dad let it slip over the phone. I remember he sounded soft and echoey, like he was holding the phone far away from his mouth, or standing inside a big, empty room. He had just told me he had sold the farm.

"But what about my pony?" I asked. "Do the new people get him?"

"Oh—your pony died, Katie," he replied. "I thought your mom told you."

"What happened to him?"

"He just got old, I guess." His voice was so echoey it was hard to understand what he was saying.

"No," I said. "What happened to him after? Did you bury him? Can I see where?" I had heard of glue factories, and I had a bad feeling that's where the pony had gone.

"No. I just dragged him out into the field with the tractor. The coyotes will take care of him."

I pulled at the place in the phone cord where the coils went the wrong way. "Dad? Where are you going now?"

"Oh—up North. Maybe up to Inuvik. I hear there are lots of jobs there."

"Will you get a new farm up there?" I tried to picture my dad farming, with Inuits in parkas holding big harpoons all around him.

"No, probably not," he replied. "We'll see when I get there."

"Can I come visit you up North?"

"Sure," he said. His voice suddenly sounded bright and clear, as though he had finally held the phone up to his mouth. "I'll call you when I get settled in."

But I knew he wouldn't.

I didn't see him for nearly ten years after that. When my brother Michael was old enough, I told him stories about the Inuit. I didn't mention our father. Before Inuvik, when Dad used to call, Michael never wanted to talk to him. He would shrug away the receiver if Mom or I held it to his ear. He would look at us, stubborn, his lower lip crushing his top one.

When I got to high school, I knew that I should feel angry and hurt and go into therapy and have issues about men, but I didn't—I really didn't. I didn't have crushes on my older male teachers or resent the men that my mom occasionally dated. Every now and then I would hear news of my father, second-hand, through his friends, or distant relatives. I guess they thought it was their duty to keep me informed about where he was. Apparently, he spent a few years in Inuvik, then moved back down to B.C. to live with his oldest son, my half-brother Kent.

Once, when my mom and I were fighting, I threatened to leave home and go live with my dad and my brother Kent. It was an empty threat and we both knew it.

"Go ahead," she replied stonily. "We'll see how long that lasts." I think I just walked away from that argument.

Not long before he left, Dad stopped by the house to drop off Kent for the weekend while he went out of town to visit some friends. It was after I had stopped going out to stay at my father's place. Kent was a couple of years older than me, and he lived with Dad. Sometimes, I would go and stay with them on their farm outside of town. Kent had helped me learn to ride my pony.

"I want you guys to keep a close eye on Kent," Mom murmured to Michael and me as Dad's truck pulled into the driveway.

Kent climbed down from the truck holding a plastic shopping bag full of clothes. He looked as though he had been crying.

"What's wrong?" I asked, surprised. I didn't know teenage boys cried.

Kent grinned suddenly. "Nothing," he said, "as long as you guys have cable." He turned to wave at Dad, who was already backing down the driveway. He spun around and looked at Michael. "Come on," he said. "Show me where you keep the good toys."

Michael didn't answer. He fixed his gaze on the ground. And he didn't follow Mom, Kent and me into the house. Instead, he shuffled out to the back yard.

Kent went straight to the couch and flicked on the TV.

"Are you hungry?" Mom called from the kitchen.

"No," he replied, without looking up.

I tried to watch TV with him, but he flipped from channel to channel, and I couldn't follow any of the shows. I gave up and went outside to find Michael. Kent followed me, leaving the TV on. I didn't say anything.

Michael was unchaining his bike from the back stair railing.

"Can I borrow your bike, Katie?" Kent asked.

I shrugged, looking at my new ten-speed. It was my birthday present from Mom. "Fine," I said. I watched my brothers ride down the driveway without me.

When they got back, the bikes and their pant legs were caked with mud. Mom made them take off their jeans in the back yard. When Kent complained, she handed them old towels to wrap around their waists for the dash from the patio to the front door.

"Where did you guys go?" I asked Michael once Kent was inside.

Michael shrugged. "The park. The creek."

"Was it fun?"

He looked at me vaguely and murmured something I couldn't quite hear before he followed Kent into the house.

When I was twenty-one, one of those distant relatives who had kept me up on my dad's whereabouts all those years called me. I was living in the city then, going to University. I was impressed that she had found my phone number. I figured she was going to tell me my dad had moved again, so I automatically reached for a pen to make a note of his new address. Not that I would ever write him—I never had, but it seemed wrong somehow to be told his new address and not write it down, especially after these people I hardly knew were so careful to get these addresses to me. And I knew that they never called Michael

with addresses or phone numbers, or counterfeit *Merry Christmas*es or *love*s that they said came from our father. It was up to me to preserve the scraps of paper, to stick them up on the fridge where Michael might see them when he stopped by. I never gave them to him. I knew he would never take them. My hand was poised over an empty corner of a page of class notes. *Dad:* I wrote.

"Katie?" my old aunt said, her voice wavery and tearful. "I'm so sorry, Katie. Your brother Kent—he died. Shot himself. In the garage. Oh Katie—can you make it down for the funeral?"

"Sure," I replied. I picked up the pen that I hadn't realized that I had dropped.

"I am so sorry, Katie."

A few moments later I murmured a *thank you*, and hung up the phone. I felt strange and floaty. I tried to call up an image of the brother I hadn't seen since I was twelve. He didn't seem sad in the memories I had of him. In fact, I suddenly remembered the way he used to laugh—that ironic-sounding *tss-sss-sss*, the air hissing through his teeth. How he used to walk out into the field to sit on the rock pile near the fence on the other side and smoke. Sometimes, he let me follow him, but most of the time, he went alone. I remembered the weekend he spent at my Mom's house. I remembered how at the farm he tried to teach me how to ride my pony. How he lifted me up into the saddle, his hands digging into my armpits as I tried to hook my foot into the stirrup and pull myself up.

I sat for a while after I hung up the phone. I was trying to remember if I had any other memories of Kent. I couldn't think of any real ones. I had only really met him once or

twice before I was ten, when he and Dad came back together to spend almost two years on the farm. Before that, he lived with his mother in Vancouver. I remembered a lot of times when my mom or my dad talked about Kent, but I couldn't really remember anything else about *him*. It bothered me that I couldn't. Finally, I picked up the phone again and called my mom.

She cried. When I asked her to come to the funeral with me, though, she said she couldn't. I think she didn't want to run into my father.

I called my brother Michael.

"Wow," he said, just like that, a word that was somehow flat and round at the same time. *Wow.*

Michael said he didn't want to go to the funeral either, so the next week I drove my little car alone to Kimberly and stayed in a cheap motel with hard, lumpy beds and no television. After I checked in and unloaded my suitcase, I sat on the bed and stared for a long moment at the peeling wallpaper, feeling lonely and sorry for myself. I had some time to kill before the funeral. Kimberly was a pretty town in the Rockies, so I decided to go hiking.

It was May, and the place was really green. The town itself was kind of spread-out, so I could hike through the forest without actually leaving town. The trees were tall and soft-looking. There was moss all over the ground, and the air felt warm and damp. I drew a deep breath and started climbing along a wide dirt path that led away from the hotel and its cracked asphalt parking lot and my crappy little car. I kept looking up towards the tops of the trees and drawing in full clean breaths. I started to enjoy myself.

I tilted my face upwards, enjoying the sunlight that splashed warmth on my face between branches, and the bright, crisp air.

As I hiked further up the trail, though, I noticed that the air was changing. A heavy, sweet burning smell settled on me. It seared the inside of my nostrils and made me gag. I had to sit down on the wet ground. I felt dizzy. The acrid smell hung around me for a long moment in a soft, bluish haze, then slowly wafted away, leaving the forest air soft and clear and green once again. I stood. My head hurt and my stomach was queasy. I made my way slowly back down the trail to the motel. When I got there, I shut myself in my room. I lay down on the motel bed, wishing my headache away. I spent the rest of the day napping and reading old magazines from the bedside drawer. I hardly slept at all that night.

The funeral was the next day. About a hundred half-remembered faces, red and blotchy with tears, swarmed around me, not recognizing me, bumping into each other in awkward consoling embraces. Their hushed, eager whispers buzzed around my head. I looked, but I didn't see my father.

I took a seat in a back pew and wondered why the seats had to be so uncomfortable. The service was long and religious. I tried to remember whether Kent or my dad had ever even mentioned God. I didn't think so. I started to feel drowsy. The funeral home was hot, and the smell of so many people made me feel like I couldn't get enough air.

Finally, the service was over, and all the teary, blotchy faces filed out of the chapel into the parking lot. I saw my dad then, and I was shocked at how small and frail he seemed. At first, I thought it must have been the grief that had changed him, then I

realized that this was the first time in nearly ten years that I had seen him. His suit was wrinkled. He noticed me and walked toward me, his steps wavery, almost aimless. I took a few steps towards him.

He was holding a little square box under his left arm. It was made of a silvery metal.

"What's that?" I asked, forgetting to either greet or console him.

"It's your brother," he replied. His voice was thin and old-mannish. When I think of it now, I'm surprised that he recognized me. It had been so long since the last time he'd seen me. "We had him cremated."

"Dad—" I didn't know what to say. "I'm so sorry."

He nodded, and turned his red-rimmed eyes up to the hillside with its soft green trees. "He did it in the garage."

I didn't want to hear this. "I know."

He turned his watery eyes back on me then. "It made a terrible mess. All over the garage."

"I'm sorry," I said again.

Just then, a sweetish, acrid cloud dropped itself slowly around us. I could see it descend upon the departing mourners.

"Dad, what is that smell?"

"It's the crematorium, on the other side of the chapel," he replied softly. He was looking up at the trees again.

I felt dizzy suddenly, and sat down on the edge of the sidewalk. My dad sat down next to me, putting the little silver box down between us.

"He made an awful mess," my dad said, tears running down his wrinkled cheeks. He had his hand on the box, and was rubbing its lid absently.

"Did you—have to…" My voice trailed off. I didn't want to say "clean up." I wondered whether the garage had a workbench. I wondered whether there had been a car parked in there, or a lawnmower, or maybe some old scrap lumber. I wondered whether the garage door had been open, whether people could walk by and look in and see the awful mess.

"No," he replied. "Victim's Services does that. I just had to call them." He took his hand off the box then, and reached out and held mine. It felt natural to me, sitting there, holding my dad's hand. After a moment, I moved both of our hands onto the little box. It was warm from where his hand had been earlier. "They took care of it."

It's probably better that way, I thought. I imagined a woman in rubber hip waders and yellow rubber gloves and a bandanna tied on her head, mopping at the mess with a strong-smelling soap solution, washing the blood and bits of tissue down a drain in the floor. I had to close my eyes. Finally, I opened them. My dad had this lost, sleepy look on his face. He was staring up into the trees above us. I followed his gaze and I saw that the foul-smelling smoke was moving its way up the hill and into the soft green trees.

My dad and I sat for a long while on the sidewalk of the memorial chapel, holding our hands on top of the little metal canister that held my brother's ashes. Finally, after everybody else had left, I let go and stood up.

"Well," I said awkwardly, "take care." I was already backing away, towards my car.

"Are you coming with us to the lake?" my dad asked, without getting up or even looking at me.

At first I had an image of some sort of after-funeral beach cook-out, with Kent's old friends peeling down to bathing suits and shorts. "The lake?" I asked shakily.

"To scatter these," he replied, still not looking at me. He rubbed his hand in a slow polishing motion over the silver canister. He seemed so lost and confused, I worried how he was going to make it out to some lake in the mountains alone.

"Sure," I replied. "Do you want me to drive?" He nodded and followed me to my car.

"He liked it out there," my dad said as we walked. "He liked to go fishing."

At the funeral I had recognized the aged faces of aunts and uncles and cousins that I hardly knew, and that I hadn't seen since I was a little girl. When we got to the lake, a whole new set of mourners had taken their place. For the most part, these were at least a generation younger. There was no shocked, hungry whispering here, only crying and that lost, aimless kind of hugging that people do.

I parked my car under a tree, then jogged around to help my dad out the passenger door. He held on to my arm, and we walked down to the lake. The silver canister was tucked under his other arm. To my surprise, I saw Michael standing by himself near a patch of bushes, a few feet away from one of the crying, hugging groups of people. He wasn't looking my way. I left my dad and the canister on the short dock at the edge of the lake, then walked back up to find Michael. He was staring down to the dock, at our

shrunken, frail-looking father. I could see him taking in the aimlessness in the way our father moved.

"Hey," I greeted him. "I thought you weren't coming."

"I changed my mind."

We stood and waited. We didn't say anything, and we were at a good distance from the clumps of mourners who cried and hugged and rubbed each other's shoulders. We just stood and waited, looking around and not saying anything. It was a pretty place, I noticed. The kind of mountain lake you see on the postcard racks in Banff or the West Edmonton Mall. There were mountains in the background, and thick, lush trees all around. The lake water looked clean and bluish. I could understand why Kent had liked to spend time up here. It could have been so quiet.

For a long while, everyone just hung around the edge of the lake, waiting. My dad sat alone on the dock with the canister. Finally, Helen, his first wife and Kent's mother, pulled up in a grey minivan and joined him down there. That seemed to be a signal of sorts; everyone meandered down to the water's edge.

I don't know if things had been planned in advance or whether my dad and Helen just led the group on the spot, but a little ceremony took place. My dad pulled open the canister and held it for Helen. She reached in and scooped up a handful of ashes. Crying, she tossed them out over the water. Then she took the canister from my father, and he did the same. One by one, the weeping guests walked to the end of the dock to toss burned little pieces of my brother into the water.

I couldn't help thinking about Kent like that—burned up, ground down into little pieces. I knew how it happened. I had once watched a television special on cremation. I knew how they had to crush up the bigger pieces once the flames had burned out.

Michael looked at me. His gaze was bright, like sunlight off the lake. "Are you ready?" he asked me. I nodded, but I felt suddenly shaky. I took his arm, and we walked together to the end of the dock.

Both my father and Helen were crying. They looked so old. Helen was holding the canister close to her chest. When we got up close to her, she nodded to us and gave us a sad little smile. "Go ahead," she whispered.

Michael reached in first. He pulled his fist from the canister and swung his arm out in an arc across his body. I thought the ashes would scatter and drift off on the wind, but they didn't. They just sort of fell into the water with a muffled *plop*, like wet sand.

It was my turn. I looked at my dad, but he was staring down into the lake where the ashes had fallen. It looked like he was daydreaming. Still holding Michael's arm, I took a step towards Helen and looked into the canister.

I reached in and my hand met clumpy, grey ash with little white pieces of bone, of tooth maybe. I felt dizzy, but I dug my fingers in anyway. The ashes felt thickish, almost oily. I quickly tossed them out into the lake. They fell in a series of scattered little *plops*. I turned away quickly, not wanting to look at Helen or my father again. Michael followed me off the dock and onto the beach, where another pair of mourners was already waiting.

We stood as everyone took their turn. Ashes were smeared into my hand and caught under my nails. I couldn't stop crying, and my nose was running. I pulled my sleeve over my other hand and rubbed at my face with it.

Finally it seemed that everyone had taken their turn, throwing Kent, piece by piece, into the lake where he used to go fishing. Helen closed up the canister and walked slowly off the dock with it, crying. A group of mourners enfolded her and led her away. My dad stayed at the end of the dock.

"Come on," I murmured to Michael and led him to the edge of the water. The beach was rocky, not sandy. I crouched at the water's edge and rinsed off my hand, watching the grey soot swirl and disappear into the clear water. I kept my fingers in the cool water for a moment longer, then I ran my fingers over the pebbles along the bottom. They felt nice—round and smooth, but with a fine, rough surface. I ran my fingers back and forth across them for a long moment.

"We should go," I told Michael. I stood up slowly, looking out over the pretty blue postcard lake. "It's a long drive."

"We should make sure Dad gets home okay first."

We walked back out onto the dock. Dad was just standing there, staring down into the lake. I followed his gaze, expecting the water to be muddy with ash, little pieces of bone floating on top. It wasn't. It was clear, and I could see the pebbles on the bottom. The water wasn't that deep.

"Come on, Dad," Michael said, his hand on Dad's shoulder. "It's time to go." Without saying anything or even looking up, my dad nodded and let us lead him off the dock.

"You drive," I told Michael, handing him my car keys.

"I'm going to get a ride with Helen," Dad said suddenly. She was standing in front of her minivan with a group of people that I didn't know. They were about our

brother's age, and they were all crying. Dad walked off towards them without saying anything else.

Michael watched him go. "That's the first time I've seen Dad since I was a little kid," he said

"I know. Me too." We stood there for a long moment, then finally Michael turned towards my car and I followed.

The last time I went to visit Kent and my father on the farm was the day Kent took me out to teach me to ride my pony. He led us out into the field, then stood there as I squiggled in the saddle, trying to keep my balance on the hard, smooth leather. When I had had enough of sitting still, watching Kent smoke, and jerking forward every time the pony bent his neck to chew a mouthful of grass, I told Kent to take us back. He rolled the live ash off the end of his smoke onto a rock before stuffing it into his pocket.

A few minutes later, he had to open the barbed wire gate at the edge of the field. While he was prying off the wire loop that held the posts together, my pony reached down for another mouthful of grass. I lurched forward, catching my arm on the barbed wire as I fell.

"You okay?" Kent asked, bending to help me back up.

"Yeah," I replied, fighting back tears. My jacket was torn, and a jagged red line marked the barbed wire's trail across my skin.

Kent reached for me to help me back on the saddle.

"No," I said quickly. "I'll just walk back."

When we got to the house, Dad was standing outside.

"I fell," I said, showing him my arm, and I let the tears that I'd been holding back slide down my cheeks.

He looked at the cut without touching me. "It's not too bad. Let Kent help you clean it up while I unsaddle the pony."

"That's okay," I replied, biting the side of my cheek to try and hold back any more tears. "I can do it myself."

Michael waited while I picked up my stuff from the motel and paid the bill. Then I made him move to the passenger seat, and we pulled out onto the highway. The day was bright and clear, and a little chilly for May. A good driving day.

We wound through the Rockies in my old car, listening to the radio and talking about school and other indifferent things for a while. As the landscape flattened out, so did our conversation. My head felt heavy from crying—I always got a headache when I cried. We pulled over so my brother could take the wheel.

In the passenger seat, I kicked off my shoes and curled up, my jacket rolled like a pillow against the window. I closed my eyes, but I couldn't sleep. I knew that Michael knew I was awake. He was silent for a long time.

"Katie," he said at last. I opened my eyes.

"Yeah?"

"I don't remember Kent. At all." His eyes never left the road.

"Well, you were pretty little when he and Dad left," I said.

"I know." He paused for a moment. I could tell that he wanted to say something else. "I thought I remembered him," he said finally. "But I don't. I just remember you

and Mom telling me stuff about him and—" his brow was wrinkled, and I noticed how his hands were gripping the steering wheel. He was kneading it, fidgeting like he did when he was thinking. "I remember *remembering* him. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah," I replied. It did make sense. I stared out at the road, watching the painted white line slide by as we rounded a curve. "Hey, do you think Dad's going to be okay?"

"Dad?" He looked surprised. He glanced at me, then flicked his eyes back onto the road. "Yeah. Dad'll be fine."

We didn't talk about Kent or Dad for the rest of the trip. It was dark when we pulled into the city. I dropped my brother off at his apartment, then drove home to mine. I had accidentally left the kitchen light on when I had left, and I was grateful for that. I sat down on the couch and turned on the television. I couldn't sleep. I watched infomercials all night.

That summer I worked as a cashier in a supermarket. I took all the extra shifts I could get, working fifty and sixty hours a week. I didn't really do much else. My co-workers would invite me to go out with them sometimes, but I always turned them down. It just seemed like too much, and I felt so tired. When I wasn't working, I was sleeping. I slept a lot. I drank a lot of coffee.

Michael worked overtime that summer too, doing labour on a road crew. We hardly saw each other. Every few weeks or so, my mom would call me and complain that we hadn't been home to visit her. I told her we couldn't get the time off work.

"Come on, Katie," she said once. "If you really wanted to take a weekend off to come and see me, you could."

"I'm sorry, Mom. I've got to save money for school. I can't afford to take any time off."

"You know, if your Dad would help you out with school, you wouldn't have to work all those extra hours."

I didn't answer her. I just told her I loved her and I'd talk to her soon. And I waited for her to hang up first.

I never called my dad after Kent's funeral, and he didn't try to get hold of me. I had been worried he would. I kept thinking that he was going to show up at my apartment with a suitcase, telling me he was moving in.

The summer dwindled, and I started getting ready to go back to university. I made a lot of money that summer, and hadn't spent much. For the first time, I didn't need to take out a student loan.

The day before classes started, I worked a twelve-hour shift. It was my last day at the supermarket, and I really wanted to make the best of it. I got home late that evening, my feet throbbing and my head pounding. I ate a bowl of cereal and fell asleep in front of the television.

I woke up late the next morning. My neck ached from the pillows on the couch. A Christian morning show flickered across the TV screen. I didn't bother to shower, just brushed my teeth and stuffed a notebook and pen into my bag on my way out.

My place was only a few blocks from the university campus. It took less than ten minutes to walk there. But instead of going to class, I sat down on the grass in front of

the Arts building. It was a nice day—sunny. I closed my eyes and rolled my head back and forth, willing the muscles in my neck to loosen. I tried to relax, to enjoy the warm, late-summer day, but I was restless, couldn't sit still. I stood and brushed the dry grass off my backside. I knew I wouldn't be able to sit through any classes that day. My brother's apartment was only a few blocks away.

He took so long to answer his doorbell that I was about to leave. Finally, his voice crackled over the intercom. He buzzed me into the building.

When he let me into his apartment, he was brushing his teeth. He was still in his bathrobe. "Be right there," he called through the toothpaste as I walked past. I looked into his room and saw that he had laid on his bed out a new-looking sweater and a pair of cords.

The TV was on, and I sat down on the couch. It was a court show—the judge was yelling at the defendant. I wanted to change the channel, but I couldn't find the remote.

"Michael?" I called.

He opened the door. "Don't you have class today?" he asked. His bathrobe was tied with a knot and half-bow in the front. I could see the creases on the front and across the shoulders where it had been folded.

"I'm not going," I said. "Are you?"

He glanced into his room. I knew he was eyeing the smart cords-and-sweater that he'd chosen for the day. "Nah," he said. He sat down next to me.

"Do you want to go and get some breakfast?" I said.

"I've already had breakfast."

"Lunch, then?"

"Sure." I could tell he didn't really want to, but I didn't say anything. "Right now?" he asked. He sat down on the arm of the chair nearest his bedroom door. I shrugged and sat down on the couch opposite him.

"Michael, have you heard from Dad?"

"No. Why? Have you?"

"No," I said. I wanted to tell my brother to sit down so we could talk, but I knew he didn't want to. He wanted to put on his brand new outfit and go to class.

"Look," Michael said, standing up, "Do you just want to hang out here?"

"For a while," I said. I picked up his remote control and flicked through the TV channels while Michael got ready.

"We'll get lunch later," he said on his way out.

After he left, I sat for a long time on his couch, thinking that my dad was going to show up at my apartment with a suitcase, telling me he was moving in. I pictured him, dressed in the same rumpled suit he had worn to the funeral, looking old and tired and confused, waiting outside my door for me to invite him in. Telling me he needed a place to stay.

Queen Liz

Liz leaned against the counter and watched her daughter do the dinner dishes. Katie had used too much soap, and the suds climbed the edges of the sink, clinging to the glasses and plates even after she rinsed them. Liz didn't say anything. Instead, she watched Katie's left arm move in and out of the band of sunlight that doused the sink and the counter. She looked at her daughter's thin fingers, big knuckles, bony wrists. They were like her own hands, only smoother, not so red yet.

"Turn on the hot water, Katie," Liz said at last. "Hot as you can stand. It'll disinfect the dishes, and it's good for you. You'll never get arthritis if you remember to always use hot water when you do the dishes."

"Who told you that?" Katie kept on washing the dishes. She didn't turn on the hot.

"My aunt Pauline. She lived to be ninety, and never got arthritis in her hands. Always did her dishes in straight hot—never even touched the cold water faucet."

"Mmm. Could be genetics."

Liz drew in her breath, ready to answer, then she changed her mind. She blew the air back out slowly, and took another breath, this one slower, not so deep. "Stay tonight, Katie. Would it make any difference if you went back tomorrow morning? You can get up early, be in the city with time to spare."

"Mom, I can't." Hand back into the dish water again, a bowl in the drainer, leaning against a glass. Gobs of soap bubbles running down both. Liz would rinse them all again after Katie was done. "I told you that this morning. I have to study, and I didn't bring any of my books."

"Why would you just come down for the day? You'll have spent more time driving today than you did visiting. It doesn't make sense."

Katie had surprised Liz that morning, pulling up to the house at an hour that Liz would have thought she'd be still in bed in the city. She had hovered in the kitchen all day, munching at the food Liz thrust at her, answering Liz's questions noncommittally. She did that. She showed up, drifted through her visit in a way that only reminded Liz that she would be leaving soon. And then, just as suddenly as she had come, she would go. Liz would be listening to the sound of her engine drift away up the street almost before she realized her daughter had been there.

"Mom." Katie pulled the sink stopper, and the water gurgled down the drain. The soap stayed in the sink. "I can't. I really can't. This was all the time I could spare, okay?" She dried her hands and left the damp tea towel on the counter next to the drainer. Liz would pick it up when she rinsed the dishes. She would rinse the soap out of the sink. She would pull apart Katie's unmade bed and wash the sheets so that they would be fresh the next time Katie came to visit. She had time to do that, now that she was retired.

"I should get going," Katie said.

"You're studying too hard," Liz said. "You're going to burn out. If you need to take a break, take a break."

"Mom. Stop. Please." Katie squeezed past Liz.

"When are you coming back next?" Liz was following her daughter down the hall to her bedroom.

"I don't know. When I can get away." Katie threw an armload of clothes into her duffel bag, not bothering to fold them.

"When will that be?" Liz was frustrated by the vague tone in her daughter's voice. "A week? A month? When? And why don't you bring your brother down next time? He doesn't have a car, remember. It's harder for him to make it home."

"I don't know, Mom. I'll be back when I can." Katie's voice had gone flat, and her eyes suddenly looked tired and bland. Liz knew she had pushed too hard. "And Michael can call me if he wants a ride."

"Okay. Okay. But drive safely." When she grasped her daughter's hand, she felt the dry, rough knuckles under her fingers. "Look. Your hands are so dry. You use too much soap when you wash the dishes. Come on, I have some of that good hand cream." And she pulled her daughter across the hall into the bathroom. "Here," she said, pressing a jar into Katie's palm. "Take this with you." All the questions she hadn't asked yet burned her tongue. *How is Michael? Have you heard from your father? What is he doing now? Do you talk to him?* She knew it was too late now to ask without sounding desperate.

"Okay, Mom. Thanks."

"See? Try it." Rubbing the lotion into her daughter's free hand. "It's better than the drug store stuff."

"Yeah. Thanks. But I should get going."

"I love you, Katie." Tears already in the corners of her eyes.

"I love you too." A quick hug, and Katie was pulling on her shoes. Her car keys jingled between her fingers. And before Liz knew it, Katie was gone, rumbling off towards the city in her unreliable little car. Liz sat over a smouldering cigarette, staring at the spots on the linoleum where Katie had let soap suds fall. She felt edgy—her foot jogged back and forth, her ankle rubbing against the leg of the chair. She thought about her daughter, riding off to the city alone, to her little apartment, all by herself, washing her dishes in cold water and too much soap. *She's derailing*, Liz thought suddenly. *She's already off track.* She snubbed out her cigarette, even though she hadn't really smoked it. *I should be the one visiting her.*

"It's awful," Miss H. Mundy whined softly. Her wide eyes were nearly the same colour as the milky tea that hovered in her unsteady hand, just below her chin. "Awful. Really, I am so unhappy. I haven't had a decent cup of tea outside this flat since I left England. Tepid. Always tepid here. Horrible."

Liz nodded, trying to look sympathetic. She didn't like tea. She never had. "And how long has that been?" she asked politely, her eyes on the wooden wall clock shaped like a teapot above Miss H.'s head. 5:12. She leaned back, looking at the yellowish fridge in the corner of the kitchen.

"Twelve years." A slow, sorrowful shake of the head. "Twelve years this spring."

Liz tried to guess how old Miss H. Mundy was. Soft watery eyes, crackled-looking skin. Late forties? Fuzzy yellowish curls, surprisingly good figure. Early

thirties? Liz really couldn't tell. It was disconcerting. She rose from her chair at Miss H.'s kitchen table. "I should check to see if Katie's home yet."

"Oh, no," Miss H. replied cheerfully, teacup still hovering at her lower lip. "No, no. Walls in this building are paper-thin. You can hear all the neighbours come home. Now, who were you waiting for? A 'Katie,' you said?"

"Yes," Liz said, settling back down reluctantly. "My daughter, Katie. She lives next door, in 202."

"Katie? Katie, is it? You know, the building manager hasn't bothered to put her name on the directory in the hall yet."

"Yes, I know." It was from this directory that Liz had chosen Miss H. Mundy's name. She buzzed her to get into the building when she discovered that Katie wasn't home.

Liz watched Miss H. sip her tea. She shifted in her seat, her gaze flicking again to the fridge. "It's so kind of you to let me wait here for Katie," she said at last, the words feeling affected and unnatural. She wondered whether she was unconsciously mimicking Miss Mundy's tea-time English accent.

"Oh, it's no bother! Wouldn't do for you to sit outside your daughter's door like a beggar, would it?"

Liz wondered whether an answer was expected. Thankfully, at that moment, she heard muffled footsteps down the carpeted hall and the fumble and jingle of keys. "I think that's Katie," she said, standing quickly.

"Wait and see, wait and see," Miss H. replied hopefully, still sitting, teacup in hand. But Liz could already hear her daughter's door opening and closing, the soft thud of her backpack falling against the wall, clunk-clunk as Katie's shoes flew into the closet.

"Thank you so much," Liz said again. She was already at Miss H.'s door, struggling with her shoes.

"No bother, no bother. Come back anytime."

"Thank you," Liz repeated. "May I please…" She faltered, casting another glance at the fridge.

Miss H. frowned briefly. "Yes, yes, I haven't forgotten," she muttered. She reached into the fridge and pulled out Liz's foil-wrapped roast. Before the door shut, Liz caught a glimpse of what seemed to be an entire shelf stacked with rolls of film. A heavy, bitter smell crept out of the refrigerator. "I'll see you soon," Miss H. said.

Liz just smiled as she ducked out the door.

"Mom." Katie stood in her doorway, surveying her mother with a look that very closely resembled irritation.

"Put this in the fridge," Liz ordered, thrusting the cold roast into her daughter's hands. "It's been out most of the day."

"Why didn't you call?" Katie asked, moving aside as her mother stepped into the apartment. Liz looked at the mess on the floor and the counters, but promised herself she wouldn't say anything until tomorrow.

"It's a surprise. Are you surprised?"

"I just saw you on Sunday. And you should have called first. What if I wasn't home?" Katie looked too young to be standing in the hall of her own apartment, holding a cold roast in her hands. Liz wanted to hug her, but she knew better. It would only embarrass Katie, turn her silent.

"You weren't. I was having tea with Miss Mundy."

"Who?"

"Miss Mundy. Your next-door neighbour. Don't you know your neighbours?" Liz moved a stack of books off the dining room chair and sat down. She fumbled through her purse for her cigarettes.

"No."

"Put the roast in the fridge, Katie," Liz repeated. She found a crusted-over saucer on the table that would do for an ashtray. "You should get to know your neighbours. What will you do in an emergency?"

"Call 9-1-1." Katie still hadn't moved, and she still held the roast out in front of her. "Mom, it's a non-smoking apartment."

"Well, it's probably better anyway. If this mess caught fire, the whole place would burn up," Liz said and immediately regretted it.

Katie spun away from the table and yanked open the fridge. She stuffed the roast inside, jars and plates clanking and crashing together on the shelves. She slammed the door shut but didn't turn around. "Why are you here, Mom?"

"I thought you could use a hand," Liz said, and then, more feebly, "I missed you."

"You should have called."

"I haven't seen this place since we moved you in."

"You still should have called."

Liz and Katie ate cold roast beef sandwiches in front of the TV, hardly saying a word. Then, from the back of her bedroom closet, Katie managed to find a spare sheet—clean enough, Liz supposed—and a blanket. They made up the couch in the living room. Then Katie disappeared into her bedroom, telling Liz she had to be up early.

"Katie?" Liz sat on the edge of the couch, wishing her daughter would come sit down next to her. Katie reappeared, leaning against the bedroom doorframe. "Do you know any of your neighbours? Do you know anything about *any* of them?"

"No."

"Who *do* you know?" Liz pressed her hands into the softness of the couch cushions, kneading the foam with the tips of her fingers.

"What?" Katie asked, shifting her weight.

"Who do you *know*? Who comes to visit you here?"

Katie closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the door frame. "Mom, I have to get to bed."

Liz considered pushing it. *Not until you come here and sit down and talk to me. Really talk to me, and tell me something that will make me feel better about you living next door to people like Miss Mundy.* Instead, she smiled at her daughter. "Okay. Sweet dreams."

Liz heard music coming from her room until well after midnight. She couldn't sleep until she heard the stereo click off.

The next morning, Katie was up before eight. "I have classes all day," she said.

"What time will you be home?" Liz asked.

"I don't know. Four, five."

"Leave me Michael's number. We'll have him over for supper tonight. We can finish that roast, or I can make spaghetti."

"Michael's busy, Mom. And he has a night class on Wednesdays."

"Well, I can call, can't I?" Liz asked, exasperated. She snapped the blanket off the couch and folded it.

"Fine. The number's on the fridge." Katie moved towards the door.

"Hey. Can I have a kiss first?" Liz held out her arms, and her daughter embraced her obediently with a soft, dry peck on the cheek. Then she was gone.

First, Liz cleaned the kitchen. Stacks of dishes had been festering on the countertops, and Liz washed and dried them all. Before she put them away, she reorganized Katie's cupboards to make more room. *For more clutter*, Liz thought as she surveyed the empty centre shelf above the sink. Then she tidied the dining room, placing all Katie's books alphabetically on the nearly-empty bookshelf. She vacuumed, and washed the floors, dusted and scrubbed Katie's washroom. She considered starting in on the mess in her daughter's bedroom, but she hovered at the threshold. Her fingers itched to pull the comforter off the floor, to sort through the papers on the dresser top. Finally, she went back to the kitchen, her hands tucked in her jeans pockets. *God only knows what she's got in there.*

By noon she was tired of cleaning. She sat at the kitchen table, cigarette in one hand as she fanned away the smoke with the other. She wondered if she should wash the

walls. Instead, she found Michael's phone number on the fridge and left a message on his machine. Then she sat down again, and watched her cigarette burn down to the filter.

Then, from next door, she heard the muffled thumping of cupboard doors and the soft rush of running water. Liz felt suddenly and unexpectedly happy.

Liz sat at Miss H.'s kitchen table, watching her hostess fuss with the tea leaves, the electric kettle. Miss H. was telling a story about her search for an apartment when she had first moved to Canada, but Liz was having trouble concentrating. Her mind wandered.

When Katie was little, she would follow her mother around. Liz supposed all little girls did that. Katie used to love to do chores for Liz, especially washing floors. Only she was too little then to hold up the heavy mop and push it back and forth across the lino, so Liz would give her a bucket and a rag, and Katie would wash the floors by hand, making a soft *whish-whish* noise under her breath.

"What are you doing, Katharine?" Liz asked her once. When Katie was young, Liz resisted nicknames.

"Washing the floors, Mommy." A surprised look on her little face said, *Don't you know*?

"No, what is that sound you're making?"

Katie looked back down at the wet swirls she had made on the linoleum. "I'm on a boat. I'm swabbing the deck." Like it was obvious. She still did that, answered questions in a way that made Liz wonder if her own daughter thought she was feeble-

minded. It was funny when Katie was little. Now, whenever she talked to her daughter, Liz felt like she wasn't keeping up. And Katie was tired of waiting.

Liz wondered whether her own mother had felt this way, this lost little confusion every time she looked at her grown-up daughter. She remembered her own annoyance when her mother would call her sometimes three or four times a week at university, asking trivial things like whether Liz had remembered to pay her phone bill, and she wasn't wasting her money eating out every night, was she? *But I'm not like that!* a little voice protested. I'm not like my mother. And suddenly, she saw how funny it all was, and how terrifying. It wasn't right that Katie would have to wait until she had a grown-up kid before she figured it out for herself. Liz wanted to post road signs for her daughter, to warn her: *Danger! Sharp Curves Ahead!* And now she had followed her grown-up daughter to her city apartment and was sitting in a stranger's kitchen, sipping tea, pretending she liked it.

"Severance pay," Miss H. was saying. "Three months' worth when I got laid off. But I know how to live close to the ground. Of course, I would like to move to a better building. Honestly, the walls are paper-thin! I can hear everything that goes on on either side. Did you know—" her voice dropped, and she leaned forward, her faded-looking grey eyes glinting suddenly. "Did you know that the couple on the other side—they bring home *guests*?"

"Oh?" Liz felt that she was missing a punchline.

"Guests, love, *guests*! Into their *bedroom*!" Miss H. hissed the words, spitting slightly across the table. Her springy yellow hair looked suddenly electrified. "Shameful, isn't it?"

"Oh." Liz felt her face go warm. She sipped at her tea, and tried not to look either horrified or interested.

"If you stay until Friday, you can come by in the evening. That's when these things usually happen, Friday evening. We can sit in the living room. You can hear best from there."

"No!" Liz said quickly. "No. Thank you. In fact, I really should be going. Katie will be home soon."

"Don't bother. You know how thin the walls are, you'll hear her coming. You can hear everything."

"Thank you, but I don't want her to wonder where I am." Liz stood up, wondering whether she should bring her teacup to the sink. She eyed the plaid couch against the far wall. It looked comfortable, and not too soft like Katie's.

"I know what she calls you," Miss H. said suddenly. Her face had lit up and she looked like a grotesque yellow-haired elf in a faded flannel dressing gown.

"She talks on the phone to a man named Michael. Is that her sweetheart?"

"No," Liz replied, and knew she shouldn't listen. She should leave now, before Miss H. had a chance to poison her. She didn't move.

"Mmm," Miss H. murmured disbelievingly. "They speak to each other all the time. And she calls you—it must be you, I'm sure it is—she calls you … Queen Liz!" She tilted her chin suddenly in the air and thrust her shoulders back. Liz could see that she was naked under the dressing gown.

"Well," she said. "Thank you very much. It's been very nice. Thank you."

"You can come by and listen to them if you like," Miss H. called after her. Liz was out the door without answering.

When Liz's mother was in the hospital, not long before the cancer and drugs stole her coherence, she told Liz, "I don't really want to die, you know."

It was the only moment Liz could remember being alone in the hospital room with her mother. The doctors and nurses and Liz's sister were all away somewhere, and Liz's mother had turned to her suddenly, her eyes clear and flat, and she spoke that one surprising sentence, "I don't really want to die, you know."

"No," Liz replied. She couldn't think what else to say.

"I know I'm supposed to pretend that I do, that I'm ready to go. I'm supposed to be peaceful and dignified. But I'd rather yell and cry and throw things and call the doctors filthy names."

Liz can't remember now what she said to her mother next. Maybe she didn't say anything, maybe she just left, or maybe the doctors and Liz's sister came back before she had a chance to answer. It didn't much matter now, though, Liz knew. In the end, her mother did go quietly, just drifted off in her drug-induced sleep. Neither Liz nor her sister was there when she went. The hospital called the next day. Liz can't remember what they told her, exactly. *Your mother's dead*? No, probably something softer, placating. A nice euphemism like *passed on* or *passed away*. She can't remember either whether she went to the hospital right away, or whether they went to the funeral home first. She can't remember if she took her own car or whether she rode with her sister.

What Liz remembers now is how irritated she felt when her mother had uttered that one ridiculous, regal sentence. *I don't really want to die, you know.*

After she left Miss H.'s, Liz went for a walk. But she didn't want Katie to wonder where she'd gone, so after a few blocks, she turned back. She followed a middle-aged man through the main door, relieved that she didn't have to buzz Miss H. to let her back in.

Katie's door was locked. Liz waited, worrying that her daughter wasn't home yet. Finally, after a second knock, Katie let her in.

"Are you locking me out?" Liz asked, hurt.

"The door locks itself." Katie was barefoot, and her feet made a gentle slapping sound on the linoleum as Liz followed her into the living room.

"Where were you?" she pressed her. "I knocked twice."

"Studying. I didn't hear you."

"Did Michael call?" she asked, though she knew Katie's phone hadn't rung while she was in Miss H.'s apartment. She had been listening for it.

"No."

"Are you sure? Did you check the messages?" *Why am I pushing her?*

"Mom. I told you he wouldn't." Flat voice. Exaggerated patience.

"Fine." Liz looked hard at her daughter. Katie looked so worn, so tired, so irritated. Liz felt helpless, and irritated too. "Should I warm up that roast, or would you rather eat it cold?"

"I don't care." Katie sat down on the couch and pulled a textbook onto her lap. Her hair fell forward, hiding her face. It reminded Liz of a privacy screen, the kind

people buy to hide their beds or their laundry rooms from visitors. She had a sudden, stinging desire to slap her daughter's face.

"Katharine," she said slowly, distinctly. The syllables felt foreign on her tongue, it had been so long since she'd used them. "I took the trouble to cook you this roast, and to drive all the way here to see you. Please give me one second of your time and tell me how you would like to eat it."

Katie kept her head down for a long moment. When she finally looked up she had tears in her eyes. Liz was stunned. Suddenly, in her mind, she heard her daughter's voice curling around the words *Queen Liz*. "Do you really call me that?" she said.

"What?" Katie looked frightened, confused. Her textbook slid off her lap, thudded shut on the floor. She looked so young, too young to be here, on her own.

"Never mind," Liz said. "I'll make sandwiches. Okay?"

"Okay," Katie said. She picked up her textbook, leafed though it to find her page. Liz watched her. She wanted to take the book away, to hug and hug her daughter. Instead, she went into the kitchen to make sandwiches.

"Katie," she called as she sliced into the roast. "Do you ever wonder about me?"

"What?"

"Do you ever want to know what it was like when I was married to your father, or what I do now that you and Michael are gone?"

There was a long pause. Liz thought she heard her daughter sniffle, but she wasn't sure.

"Yeah," Katie said at last. "Sure."

The next morning, Liz waited until Katie left for classes. Then she quickly cleaned the kitchen one last time. She didn't put on her shoes until she passed Miss Mundy's door, afraid that the frightening, electric little elf would burst out of her apartment and demand that Liz come in and listen to her neighbours' group coitus. She sang along to the radio all the way home.

That night, as she sat at her kitchen counter looking at the clean, empty sink, hardly noticing as her cigarette burned down to the filter, Liz thought about the note that she'd left taped to her daughter's fridge. It said simply, *Gone home. Had a great visit. Love, Mom.* She had successfully fought the urge to add, *Come visit soon!* and she was grateful for that.

Flag Man

Summers during university, my brother Michael worked on a road construction crew. He was the flag man. He spent most of the day holding a *Stop* sign, then turning it around to *Slow*, letting the cars creep by as other people ran the machinery behind him.

I used to ask him if it didn't drive him nuts, standing around like that all day.

"I don't mind," he'd say. "It gives me time to think. And I get to spend my summers outside."

Michael had managed to collect enough scholarships not to have to worry about working summers, but he worked anyway. He told me once that he had saved almost everything he made, working the road crew. He didn't say how much that was, exactly, but I knew it was a lot. I asked him what he was saving for.

"Don't know yet," he replied.

I knew he was lying.

I drove by him a couple of times, while he was working. He didn't even look at the cars he was signalling, just gazed off, staring at the sky or the buildings, or past them, watching things I couldn't see. Behind him, the other workers on his crew tore up asphalt with jackhammers, or thrust shovels into the dry earth that lay beneath the roads. Michael didn't even seem to know that they were there; he just stood in front of them, holding his sign in one hand, with the other hand, glove and all, thrust into his pocket, his chin tilted up and away from me and the people in the other cars.

With all the money he made, my brother didn't bother to buy a car for himself. He said he liked riding the city bus. He also caught rides home with me, whenever we went up to visit our Mom. He never pitched in for gas.

My last year of university, Michael and I drove home for Christmas Holidays. We agreed that I would pick him up at ten that morning. At eleven, I was still sitting in his living room, listening to him rummage through his closet and pack for the week-long trip. Finally, he emerged freshly shaved, his clothes neat and ironed, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

"Could you grab that one for me?" he asked, gesturing to a backpack by the foot of his bed.

I picked it up and nearly toppled under the weight. "What is this?" I asked, hoisting it over my shoulder.

"My books," he said.

"You're going to do homework over Christmas?"

"You're not?"

The ride home took three hours on a good driving day. You don't get a lot of good driving days in December. We'd had a short fall and a lot of snow already that year. The roads were slotted where tires had worn through the packed snow, and my nerves crackled at the possibility of black ice and of animals on the highway. I told Michael to keep his hands off the radio while I was driving, that I didn't need his crappy music to distract me. As I crept around the slick curves of the highway, with my teeth gritted and my fingers locked on the wheel, he teased me about being a nervous driver.

He rode with his seat all the way back, staring out the window at the sky. His legs were crossed, and he looked at once uncomfortably pretzeled and oddly lotus-positioned.

"Take your feet off the seat," I told him. He grinned and dropped his sneakers to the floor.

We pulled into my mom's driveway around suppertime. She rushed out into the cracking-cold evening air in sweatshirt and jeans. "What took you so long?" She hoisted Michael's book bag over her shoulder.

"You know how Katie drives," Michael replied, hugging her.

"As long as you're both here safe, I'm happy," Mom said, squeezing my arm with her free hand. She was smiling widely, almost vibrating with excited energy. When she ran into the house ahead of us, my brother's bag slung from her shoulder, her jeans hanging loosely on her thin legs and her too-big sweatshirt falling almost to her thighs, she looked like a little kid.

We spent a quiet week at my mom's house. Christmas was just the three of us, like it had been most of our lives. The temperature slipped down to a forbidding cold that kept us indoors most of the time, and the sun shone all week, so bright and so clear that it looked like a bleached stain in the impossibly blue sky. Michael and I let Mom fuss over us and cook us more food than we could ever eat, pretended we didn't notice when she loaded up the trunk of my car with home-made frozen dinners to take back with us.

It had been a long time since I'd been around my brother as much as I was that Christmas. Michael had grown wide-jawed and monosyllabic, and he seemed to have trouble sitting still. He walked aimlessly from room to room, or sat on the couch, watching TV and flicking from channel to channel. He hardly spoke at all, and when he

did, his voice would trail off before he reached the ends of his sentences. I filled silences for him, and so did Mom, as though we could calm the air around him and ward off that nervous silence. His textbooks lay spread across the dining room table most of the time we were there. When we sat down to eat, we would have to push them out of the way. Mom was always careful not to lose his page. Every few hours, Michael would sit down in front of his books, flipping from page to page, scribbling notes into a notebook with a torn cover, and Mom would beam at him, offering him warmed plates of Christmas leftovers. After a half hour or so of studying, though, he would be up from his seat, staring out the window, his pencil twirling in rapid circles between his fingers.

The last afternoon before classes started up again, I was jamming our bags into the back seat of my little car, as Michael looked on from the patio. He was leaning against the wall of the house, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

"If you're in that much of a hurry to get back, come help me," I called.

"I'm in no hurry," he replied. "Do you want to go for a drive?"

"Yeah," I replied. "A drive home."

"First let's go out to the cabin," Michael said.

I didn't answer for a moment. I closed the car door and leaned against it, hoping Michael wouldn't see that my right leg had started shaking so badly I couldn't put weight on it. "What if someone else lives there now?"

He shook his head. "There's no one there. I went to see it last summer. We should go have a look together."

I wanted to say no, to tell him that we had to get on the road before it got dark, but I was afraid that if I did, he would hear the thinness of my voice, my desperate desire to

stay as far away from the cabin as I could. I was afraid he would ask me why I was so afraid to go. And if he asked, I didn't know what to tell him. I felt trapped. "Okay," I called back. "Let's go."

The clear, white-brightness of the sun sharpened the cold, lending the winter air a searing quality that snagged my breath. As we drove out of town, I fought a quiet panic that was uncurling just under my rib cage. I hated the area outside the town where I'd grown up. I hated the sparse, stunted poplars and the weedy-looking fields. I hated the way the gravel roads dropped away without warning, their sides disintegrating into marshy ditches. The fields were edged with whited-over ponds, filled with cattails and stunted willows tipped in hoar-frost and poking through a heavy white blanket. I hated the loneliness of the place. I always did.

It was a long drive to the old cabin, and we had to wind through old back roads. I had been out there only once since I was a little girl, but I knew every road, remembered every field. The houses along the way seemed smaller now, and some of them looked abandoned, but I remembered them. As I cut down range roads that spat gravel at the underside of my car, I remembered every curve and every corner. Finally, I turned down the old driveway. I had to slow almost to a crawl as the heavy spruce boughs scraped the sides of my car.

When we got there, I climbed out of the car first and walked bravely to the front door. A small pine tree had grown up in front of it, and the kitchen window was smashed. The walls were weathered and greying. Here and there, bits of grass and plants

were growing out between the logs. They were dead and frost-covered, but I could see that they had taken root in the wood.

"Probably animals living inside it now," I said, brushing past Michael as I moved towards the faint indentation in the earth under the bay window. I remembered playing there when I was little; it was the spot that Dad said would be a flower bed some day. I pushed away the snow with my foot, but all I could see underneath were the same weeds and wild grasses that had always covered the rest of the cleared area around the cabin. Michael nodded, and rubbed his hand along the greying logs. He was smiling faintly, looking into the trees on the other side of the driveway.

"I remembered it being so big," he said softly. It still surprised me how deep his voice had become. I always expected a faint adolescent squeak, even though he looked much older than his eighteen years. "Look," he said, laughing, as he reached up and put his hand on the eavestrough, his fingers grazing the curling shingles of the roof.

"I'm getting cold," I said. "Can we get going? "

He was quiet for a long moment, his palms pressed flat against the cabin walls. "Can we go inside for a moment first?" He didn't wait me for to answer. "Bet the door's not locked," he called, testing it.

I followed him into the kitchen. The window had been boarded over, but the plywood had been torn away, letting in the dim winter light that managed to filter through the evergreens. I wondered if Michael had been the one to pull the plywood down. "Okay," I said, trying to relax. "Okay, Michael. What are we doing here?"

He didn't answer for a long moment. Instead, he rubbed his foot back and forth along the floor until he had pushed aside the dirt enough to see the lino beneath. He

closed his eyes. His face was mostly turned away from me, but I could see that he'd closed his eyes. "Did you ever meet my girlfriend Pam?" he said at last.

"No," I said. I thought for a moment. "I don't know, maybe. Why?"

"She was fun. I liked her. She was a runner, did triathlons, things like that." Michael had opened his eyes, but he was staring out the window, through the space where the glass clung to the frame like thick pointed teeth. "Then she went jogging one night, back when we were still dating. She was running over the High Level Bridge, and this guy came up behind her and punched her in the back of the head. She fell down. Hurt like hell, she told me, and it made her mad. When she was still lying on the sidewalk, she started swearing at the guy—*What the fuck are you doing, Why the fuck did you hit me*, stuff like that. And she said that he just stood over her, staring at her, looking confused. So finally, Pam stops swearing long enough to get scared. She's still lying on the ground, so she kind of rolls off the sidewalk, under the guard wire, and onto the road part of the bridge. Thank God there weren't any cars coming, but she did manage to flag down one guy, this old man in a great big Buick. When they drove off, she could see this guy who punched her, still standing on the bridge, watching her."

"Jesus," I said.

"Yeah," Michael replied, finally looking at me. "Police said that this guy was a rapist, he knocked women out by punching them in the head, then dragged them off to—you know." He shook his head, and looked back out the window. "Pam was lucky. She called me over the next day, told me about the whole thing. I thought she was so brave, she didn't cry or anything. I was freaked. But Pam seemed so calm when she told me about it. After that, though, she didn't want to go out much. I told her, No big deal, I

understand. I was glad she wasn't going running alone anymore. Then, pretty soon, she stopped going to her classes, she quit her job. And one day, she hands me her bank card, asks me if I'll go grocery shopping for her. Tells me she can't stand the crowds at the grocery store. She stopped going out altogether. Wouldn't leave her apartment. I bought her groceries, fucking tampons and everything, and when she ran out of money, I paid for everything. I didn't tell her she was broke, just kept taking her bank card with me when I went."

Michael stopped talking. He looked like he was going to start crying. He kept swallowing hard, blinking. "Why didn't you tell someone?" I asked him.

"Who was I going to tell?" he said. His voice was even again. He wasn't going to cry. "I didn't know her parents, and what were her friends going to do? So I just kept coming back to her place, bringing her food. She gave me her apartment key. She said she didn't need it.

"She stayed inside her apartment for nearly a month. After the first week or so, she started yelling at me every time I came by, picking fights over the kind of milk I brought her, started screaming that she doesn't like the shows on TV. And I take it. I let her yell at me, if that's what she needs to do, and I buy her groceries, and I look after her. Then, all of a sudden, she asks me for her key back. Says she's managed to re-enrol herself in a couple of classes, that she's got a job. And then she just stops calling me, won't answer when I phone her. And that's it."

I didn't know what to say. I just stood there. I couldn't look at Michael. He shuffled off, and I could hear him prowling around the place, heard him dragging something—maybe it was our old bunk bed—across the floor in the room we used to

share. I didn't want to follow him, just stayed where I was, looking at the cracked log wall. I stood there, listening to Michael move through the bedrooms of the cabin until my fingers were frozen and numb, and my toes became unresponsive lumps in my boots. I walked back out to my car, hoping that he would hear the engine. I held my hands in front of the hot air vents, waiting for him.

Finally, he emerged. I watched him shut the door behind him, shove it with his shoulder to make sure it was closed.

"Just wait a minute," he said as he climbed into the car.

"I want to get home," I said. "To the city."

"Help me."

I looked at him. He was looking at the cabin, smiling a little. "Help me," he said again, more softly this time.

"Help you what?"

"Help me buy this place. We can share it. You get it one weekend, I'll take it the next. It could be fun. Like going on vacation whenever you want to."

I looked out at the rough-looking log walls, the bits of dead grass that clung to the joints. I could feel the silence, and it seemed even heavier in the cold. I had to remind myself to breathe, to draw in the searing dry air that was blasting out of the car's vents. "Michael, I can't afford it," I said at last.

He nodded. "Right," he said. "I understand." He still wasn't looking at me.

We didn't say anything else as we drove back to town.

Mom hugged us at the door until our bones almost cracked. She was still scolding us for waiting until dark to drive home as we pulled away from the house. Michael put his seat back and slept. I kept the music loud enough to keep me from dozing off.

As we rounded a dark corner on the highway, a motion in the darkness along the ditch caught my eye. I slammed on the brake, and the car skittered across the lanes and along the shoulder before finally sliding to a stop, the right bumper nudged into the snow bank. I watched as the deer leaped across the highway and down into the ditch, its white behind fading like a puff of breath into the darkness.

"What's up?" Michael asked sleepily, following my gaze into the darkness.

"Nothing." I cranked into reverse, tightening my arms to hide the quaking. "Roads are slippery." I pulled back onto the highway, and Michael fell asleep again without another word. He snored a little as he slept, and I imagined him sleeping alone in our father's cabin, his snores resonating between the cracked log walls.

It was dark by the time the highway curved us around the city. To my right, yellow-tinted lights glowed above the contours of the earth, bounded on the far side by a bright edge of pearls. We drove closer, nearing the lights, and I had a sudden desire to see what was underneath the lights and roads—a hidden world of meaning and mechanism, almost independent of everything above. I felt if I could get my fingers under that blanket of lights, I could pull it up, and it would sound like I was pulling a handful of chickweed from my mom's garden—a slow, juicy popping and tearing as I rolled the lights and the streets and the houses away from the ground. And underneath, in the cool, damp-smelling earth there would be pink worms and bright-black beetles, surprised by the sudden air on their backs. Before I could imagine them squirming and

writhing, the highway dipped down into the lights, and we were in the city, the streetlights and neon storefronts all around us, rolling alongside other cars, and I couldn't see it as a blanket anymore, as anything that could ever be torn up or rolled away.

I reached over and nudged my brother awake.

"Almost home," I said.

That night, as I lay in bed, I didn't need music to keep me awake. I couldn't close my eyes without seeing the inside of the old cabin, and Michael's oddly blank expression as he told me that story. I tried to remember if I had ever met Pam. I called up the faces of all the girls I could ever remember seeing him with. There weren't that many, and none of them seemed to fit the name *Pam*.

I didn't talk to Michael much that spring. We were both busy with school, and he never was much good at being the first to call. Every time I picked up the phone to talk to him, I would stand there, trying to think of what to say, wondering what I had been doing while my brother was buying food and tampons for his shut-in girlfriend. And I would hang up the phone, nothing to say to him, nothing to ask but questions about him and Pam.

I didn't sleep well that spring. I had nightmares, sometimes. I would wake up, and be too afraid to close my eyes again. Most often, I would phone my boyfriend Aaron who had just moved to London, usually catching him just as he got home from work. I would ask him about his day, and tell him I missed him, listening to his deep, familiar voice when he told me he missed me, too. I would close my eyes and imagine being with him in a country without breath-cracking cold and thick black forests that go on forever.

One night, I had barely fallen asleep when my dreams woke me. Too unnerved to close my eyes again, I lay awake until I knew Aaron would be home. I listened to his voice in the dark as he told me about his music students.

"Aaron," I interrupted him, "what would you do if I asked you for help?"

"What do you mean?" he asked. "What kind of help?"

"I don't know," I replied, frustrated. "Just—help."

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I replied. I closed my eyes in the dark. "I'm just tired. And I miss you."

I didn't see Michael again until one weekend, not long before the end of classes, when my mom called from his apartment. She was spending the weekend, she said, and she had cooked dinner for us.

Michael's apartment was a twenty-minute walk from mine. It was a warm night, and I enjoyed the cool, green smell of grass and damp spring earth. It reminded me that soon people would be mowing these lawns, planting flowers in the soil. I slowed down when Michael's building came into view, enjoying the softness of the night. Across the street, a guy dressed in dirty jeans and a baseball cap stepped out from a pub doorway. I felt him watching me, and my steps quickened, almost running me up the walkway and into the lighted doorway of Michael's building. My hands were still shaking when I knocked on his door

Mom was still making dinner. "Go and sit down with your brother," she said, hugging me quickly. "I'll be done in a minute."

Michael was on the couch. I took the chair. "Have you bought Dad's old cabin yet?" I asked. I hadn't meant to ask it like that, I had intended to say *Hello* first, at least, but *Hello* didn't come out.

"No." He didn't even look away from the TV.

"Michael—why do you want to buy that place? Dad only lived there a couple of years. Do you even remember being out there when we were kids?"

"A little," he replied. He wouldn't look at me. Mom came to tell us dinner was ready. He grinned suddenly and told her a joke.

Mom and Michael chatted over dishes of stew and dumplings. I couldn't keep up with what they were saying. I wasn't hungry, but I finished my supper before they made much of a dent in theirs. There was the tiniest lull in their conversation, and I blurted, "Mom, Michael wants to buy Dad's old cabin." I hadn't intended to tell her that, certainly not over supper, but I was glad that I had. I watched my mother's face, eager for her reaction.

"What?" Mom looked up from her dinner, her gaze almost frightened as she glanced back and forth between me and my brother.

"It's what he's been saving his road crew money for." I couldn't look at Michael.

"Michael?" The frightened stare was on him now. I heard Michael clear his throat and fidget in his chair.

"It was an idea I had," he said. His voice was strangely deep, and I knew he was trying to sound grown-up, in control. "I found out who bought it after Dad left, and he said he'd be willing to sell, but it's more than I can afford right now. I'd have to take out a mortgage."

"Why on earth?" Mom said. Her napkin found a dribble of stew on the table, and rubbed it briskly. "What would you do with a broken-down old cabin in the middle of nowhere?"

"I thought it would be a nice place to get away to. Weekends, that sort of thing. Only—I spoke to the bank, and I don't really have the credit to get the kind of mortgage I'd need. I would have to get someone to co-sign."

"Me." Mom's eyes had narrowed. I could look at Michael now. His gaze was locked on the table.

"I was going to ask," he muttered. His voice had softened. He had already lost his bravado.

"Michael, I don't think you've thought much about this."

Michael didn't answer. For a long while, no one said anything.

After supper, Mom went out onto the balcony to smoke while Michael and I washed the dishes. His silence prickled me, made me shut up.

"I'm sorry, Michael," I managed to say at last.

"Yeah. Well, she probably wouldn't have said yes anyway."

I heard the sliding door open then, and Mom stepped back into the living room. I looked at Michael. He was stacking the plates in the cupboard, and his back was to me, but I knew he wasn't mad anymore. "Are you doing the construction crew again this summer?" I asked him.

"Yeah. What about you? Have a job yet?"

"Not yet." I looked away. In fact, I had a job—in a library in London. But I couldn't tell him that. Not yet.

I remembered one girl that Michael introduced me to. She was small, pretty. She spoke with an accent. I wasn't sure if she was from New Zealand or Australia. We went bowling together, the three of us. It was Michael's idea. Whenever it was my turn, she and Michael would sit close together, and she was always touching him, her hand on his shoulder, or his thigh.

When she went to the washroom, I waited for Michael to ask me, *Do you like her?* or *What do you think?* He never did. He bowled his turn, then slid into the seat in front of the scoreboard, stage-whispering *Gutter ball* as I stood to take my turn. He didn't tell me where they had met, or even what she did. And before I could ask, she was back, sliding her arm hand down his back as she walked past him to bowl her turn.

I tried hard to remember her name. I was pretty sure it wasn't Pam.

No Accident

One night, as we drove home from a movie, Aaron turned to me and said, "I'd like to meet your father."

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'm curious about him."

"I've never met your parents," I said.

"And you will," Aaron said, tugging gently on my right elbow so he could hold my hand. "Once we move to England, you'll meet my father. But right now, they're both so far away. Your dad's closer."

"Not that close. It's an eight hour drive." I pulled my hand from under his and set it back on the wheel.

"So Michael can come with us and share the driving."

I almost laughed. What made Aaron think that Michael would travel a full day to see his father now?

"Aaron, you don't want to meet my Dad."

He didn't ask why not. Instead, he slid his fingers slowly up my wrist until he was holding my hand, his index and his middle finger hooked around my thumb. I kept my fingers tightly on the wheel. He didn't say anything, just held his hand there, between my palm and the steering wheel. His arm was half-extended, awkward. I wondered how long he would sit like that. I waited for him to give up, to let go. He

didn't, not even when his shoulder shook a little from the strain of holding his arm like that.

When the shaking moved down his arm and past his elbow, I let go of the wheel, letting our hands fall to the seat. His fingers snaked between mine, and he gave them a squeeze.

"Well?"

Instead of answering, I pulled into an empty strip-mall. I looked at Aaron. In the glow from the streetlights, he looked a little sickly.

"Katie, please. I really do want to meet him."

"Why?"

"Because he's part of who you are." Aaron leaned forward, and his face was shadowed by the car's ceiling. He looked like himself again, and hopeful.

I put the car into gear and pulled back onto the road. *He doesn't know what he's in for.* "Okay then. If you're sure."

The next afternoon, instead of going home after my classes, I walked to a park a few blocks away from my brother's apartment building. I sat on the steepest part of the hill, the big trees just behind me, my bag under my butt to keep the damp, early-spring snow off my pants, and looked down at Michael's building and into his apartment. It was warm enough out that I didn't feel the cold creep through my long johns and jeans for nearly fifteen minutes. Half of his dining room table showed through the narrow stone-silled window. I waited until Michael's arm plunked his book bag onto the table before I stood up and brushed the snow off my bag. I started down the hill.

"Want to come by my place for dinner?" I asked when he opened the door.

After dinner, I didn't ask Michael, I told him. "Aaron and I are going to visit Dad, and I want you to come with us."

Michael barely moved. He raised his eyebrows and repeated, "Visit Dad?"

I nodded, watching him. His expression was blank, a mask of determined neutrality.

"Please," I said at last. "Please come with us."

"I don't think—" Michael began. Then he pressed his mouth shut, as though he was worried about what words might find their way out. "Why?" he said at last.

"Because it's been a long time. And because Aaron wants to meet him. And I want to see how he's doing. Don't you?"

He didn't answer. He looked away from me, scratching his thigh absently.

"Please." I didn't care that I was begging.

"Okay," Michael said at last.

My father's phone number was written on the back of an old credit card bill. I sat next to Aaron as I dialled. Across from me, Michael was slowly stirring a dish of ice cream, mashing it to a soft paste before he ate it, just like we used to when we were kids. I listened to the ring tone, and I watched the pink, brown and cream bands swirl into a greyish blur.

"Hello?" It was the fourth ring before my father answered, and I was about to hang up. His voice startled me.

"Daddy?" I chirped, and immediately saw Michael. He was staring at me, trying to figure out if I was kidding. I had never called our father *Daddy*, not even when we were little.

"Hello?" he said, louder this time.

"Dad, it's Katie."

"Oh, hello, Katie. How are you?" He said this as though we talked every week.

"Dad, Michael and I want to come and visit. I want you to meet my boyfriend Aaron."

"Visit?" He sounded vague, as though he was trying to follow a TV show, or another conversation.

"Yes, visit. Do you have plans for the last weekend of the month?"

"No, no plans," he said. His voice had firmed up, and I wondered if he might have thought at first I was making some kind of weird joke. "I don't have a spare bedroom, though," he added.

"That's okay, Dad. We'll stay at a hotel."

"Weekend after next, then. I'll take you all out for breakfast Saturday morning."

"Okay, Dad. We'll see you then." I glanced at my brother. He was carefully spooning soupy ice cream into his mouth.

Dad said something that might have been "Goodbye, Katie," but he was too muffled again for me to be able to tell for sure.

"Wait, Dad!" I shouted in case the lines were bad. "Do you want to say 'hi' to Michael?" But there was a click, and Dad was gone.

I looked over at Aaron. He was smiling a little. "That must have been his cell phone," I said. "We got cut off."

Michael raised his eyebrows. I had to look away.

I was the only one of us with a car. It was a tight squeeze getting all of our stuff into the trunk.

When Aaron took his turn behind the wheel, he talked to keep from falling asleep. The road made him drowsy, he said. Talking kept him awake.

"What about other family?" he asked Michael and me. "Grandparents, cousins?"

Michael looked at me and shrugged. He didn't know any of our father's side of the family.

"There's an aunt," I replied, leaning forward from the back seat. "And a couple of second cousins, but we don't really know them. There were grandparents. Mom says we met them when we were really little. I don't remember."

"What about her family?" Aaron asked. "What about her parents?"

"Our grandmother died when we were kids," Michael told him, "and her husband died before we were born. No cousins on that side. Just an aunt. She and Katie are close."

Aaron smiled at me in the rear-view mirror to tell me he knew that, he remembered me telling him about her. Then he started telling a story about his cousins in Trinidad. It was one he'd told me before; he was talking to Michael now. I settled back into my seat.

Every few minutes, Aaron would toss me a glance over his shoulder. I closed my eyes, his deep, rich voice a lullaby.

One summer, I went out to Vancouver to visit my mom's sister. She took me shopping, to see a play, to do all the touristy stuff she never did on her own. We had fun. At night, we would sit in our pyjamas and laugh like teenagers at nothing. The last morning I was there, we went out for breakfast in a crowded little coffee shop in her neighbourhood. While we ate, she told me about this old guy, a distant cousin of ours, who had known my grandfather. My mom's dad had died when she and my aunt were still in university. I'd never met him.

"He's in the hospital," my aunt said carefully, sipping a soy latté. "He probably won't be coming out. But he remembers your grandfather. He's got an incredible memory, actually. He's got all these really great stories about when they were young."

"Yeah?" I pulled the paper away from my muffin. My aunt was hedging towards something in a deliberate way she had. "What kinds of stories?"

"Oh—just stories. From when they were both young. And he knew your mother when she was a girl. Really liked her, actually. I'll bet he'd get a real kick out of meeting you." Her voice had taken on a lilting fairy-tale ring.

I took a slow sip of my coffee, looking at her. She sometimes seemed so young, especially when she was excited about something. I wondered what kinds of stories this old cousin had told her about her father. Maybe the kinds of things that would have made her blush and roll her eyes if she was a teenager when she heard them, and her father was

still alive. Maybe not. I wanted to find out. "We have time for a visit before my flight, don't we?" I asked her.

My aunt smiled. "Sure, we do." She reached across the table and squeezed my hand. "He'll be so excited to meet you."

"It'll be nice to hear about my grandfather," I said. "I don't know much about him." It was true, I didn't. "I guess he was a bit of a hooligan when he was young," my aunt had told me once. I wondered where she'd heard that about her father. I wondered what she meant by it. My mom hardly talked about him at all. Not that she avoided the subject—if anybody asked, she would tell them about him. She just never brought him up, herself. She had a few pictures of him, and once, just after my brother turned eighteen, she had pulled them out to show me.

"Michael looks just like him, doesn't he?"

I smiled, but didn't say anything. Michael looked nothing at all like the deep-eyed, hollow-cheeked, big-eared stranger in the photographs.

Our cousin was on the geriatric ward of a small community hospital. Oddly, the hallway between the elevators and the nurses' station was fenced off with white wooden pickets.

"Close the gate behind you, please," the nurse called from behind the desk.

Our cousin was in a room with four other old men. Three middle-aged, fuzzy-haired women stood around his bed. My aunt smiled at them, then leaned forward, toward the thin, old man who was half-seated on the bed.

"Good morning," she said softly. "I've brought you a surprise. This is Katie. Lizzie's daughter."

I leaned over and touched his wrist. It was warm, and I could feel a strong forearm under the loose, mottled skin. "It's nice to meet you." As I straightened back up, I glanced at the other women, embarrassed. I hadn't meant to shout.

"I want the paper," the old man muttered, looking at my aunt.

"He has the paper," the oldest-looking woman explained, "but he doesn't want it. He wants the other one."

"The *Province*," one of the other women interjected. "He wants the *Province*. But they've sold out."

"Well, maybe next time," my aunt said to our cousin.

He jerked his chin up suddenly, looking at me. "Who's that?" he demanded. His eyes were heavy-lidded, pale, pale blue.

"That's Lizzie's daughter," my aunt replied. "You remember Elizabeth. My sister, Pete's oldest girl."

"No," the old man said sullenly, still looking at me. "I don't remember any Elizabeth."

The nurse came in then with the patients' lunch trays. We all watched as our cousin pulled the lid off his soup and took a messy slurp. The nurse nodded, as though she approved of the spilled soup down his front, and left.

"Not fit for a dog," our cousin said.

"Not fit for a dog," one of the women repeated, and they all chuckled. And we stood there, watching him eat. Every now and then, he would mutter a complaint, one of the women would repeat it, and they'd all laugh softly.

"Well," my aunt said at last, taking his free hand. "You take care. I'll be back to visit again soon."

I didn't say anything.

"Don't wait too long," he called as we left. "And bring your sister next time—not some girl I don't know."

I stayed quiet as we left the hospital.

"It's too bad you couldn't have met him before he was sick," my aunt said as we walked out to her car. Her voice was too bright, too quick. "He had a lot of great stories."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

There was a beat before she answered, and I looked at her. Her head was down, and she was walking fast. "A year," she said. "Almost."

I just nodded. "Who were those women?" I asked at last.

"His daughters," my aunt replied. "I've only met them a couple of times. I can't remember their names."

"So they're our cousins, too."

"I guess they are," my aunt replied. She opened my car door for me, and we drove off towards the airport. We tried to chat, to make dumb jokes, but neither of us was up for it.

I woke up when Aaron pulled the car over at a roadside turnout.

"Should we wake Katie?" Michael asked.

I still felt too groggy to drive, so I closed my eyes again, hoping Aaron wouldn't say yes.

"No, let her sleep," Aaron said. "She can take her turn later." They switched seats. Michael didn't even have to adjust his, they were that close in height. As they drove, Michael told Aaron stories about our father, about when we used to go visit him at his cabin, and later, at his farm. I don't think they were stories that he actually remembered himself. They were pieces and scraps of things I'd told him, or stories Mom told family and friends when we were growing up. I didn't correct him on details. I lay quietly, my legs curled up on the seat, listening to them talk.

The sun was setting just as we reached the mountains. I sat up, slowly rolling my neck against the cricks that pulled from my right ear to my shoulder. I could see the yellow sign of a gas station up ahead.

"My turn to drive, I think."

We all had a stretch in the gas station parking lot. I knew that we looked silly, like long-distance runners training in jeans and, in Michael's case, snow boots. We took our turns in the one-stall restroom, and while Michael and I waited for Aaron, my brother leaned over the car and opened his mouth to say something. For a second, he didn't say anything at all, just exhaled slowly through his open mouth. "Katie," he said at last. "Are you sure about this?"

"It was Aaron's idea," I replied.

We pulled into Kimberley close to eleven that night. Too late, we decided, to knock on Dad's door. We had planned on staying at a bed and breakfast that Aaron had found on

the Internet, but when we got there, the front desk was closed. We ended up getting rooms at the same awful hotel where I'd stayed for our brother's funeral.

"This place is really something," Aaron laughed, trying to bounce on the rock-hard bed.

We'd opened the door between Michael's room and ours. "It's an adventure," he called from the bathroom.

I was surprised to see Aaron so good-natured about the place. Normally, he had told me, he liked to stay in nice hotels. *There's no point in going on vacation if you stay in a dive.*

I changed into my pyjamas in our bathroom. Even though we weren't meeting my dad until breakfast, my jaw was already clutching with nervous energy. I sat on the toilet seat, listening to Michael and Aaron joke about the bedspreads and the curtains.

When I came out, Michael and Aaron were sitting on our bed, looking at tourist brochures they'd picked up from the front desk. I pulled back the covers on the other side and crawled in with my book. Michael took the hint.

"See you in the morning," he said. As he left, he pulled the door between our rooms shut.

Aaron lay back onto the pillow next to me, and we were still for a moment, before he rolled over and kissed me, slipping his tongue between my lips. It was a moment before I could relax my lower jaw and meet his tongue with my own. Then, with my mouth, I traced a line down his chin, along his neck and to his collarbone. And I bit him. Hard.

"Ah!" he cried, and the sound was as much surprise as it was pain. He tried to push me away, but I dug my fingers into his arms, tightened my leg against his thigh, pulling his warm strength against the length of me.

Don't let go.

I never was good at matching people's faces with those of their parents, their relatives. Sometimes, my mom would lean toward me at the grocery store or a restaurant and whisper, *She looks just like her mother, doesn't she?* and I would nod and tell her, *Yeah, she does,* even though I couldn't see at all what the two ad in common. I could look at a young man or woman and picture exactly what they would look like when they reached middle age. Or I could see what people my mom's age looked like when they were young. It made me really sad, actually. But I never could isolate a person's nose, or their chin, and match it up against the noses and chins of people they were related to. The phrase *He has his father's eyes* always seemed absurd to me. He had his own eyes. His father had his. You don't share facial features like desserts or taxi cabs.

Once, when I was living at home, I spread out a whole bunch of old photographs on my bedroom carpet. I can't remember now if my grandfather's big-eared face was among the others. I had picked out all the ones of my parents and my grandparents and my relatives, from when they were young. My age. There was a picture of my mother, from when she was in high school, and one of her sister from around the same time. There were pictures of my father, and his parents' wedding photo. And there were some pictures of people that my mom said were family, although I couldn't remember who they were, exactly. I took my time, spread them out in a grid on my carpet, making sure

that there was the same amount of space between each one. Then I took my brother's most recent school picture in one hand, and mine in the other, and I compared them with the faces dotting my floor. I covered parts of us, revealing only eyes, noses, chins, trying to match them with the others.

When I finally gave up, I was dizzy. I couldn't find a single face, or a part of a face that looked like mine, or Michael's. And for months after that, whenever I looked at someone's picture, I couldn't see *them*, couldn't see their whole face. I saw a forehead, eyes, cheekbones, a chin, a jawline, a smile, that wouldn't come together to form a whole person anymore.

The next morning, Michael and I gave Aaron a five-minute car tour of downtown Kimberley before we headed up to my dad's house. The tour was my idea; I needed the time to calm down, to coax the chirpiness out of my voice. I had the address in my hand, but I also remembered the place from the last time I'd been there. I hadn't been inside then—I'd just driven past when I first got to town, wanting to see where my Dad lived. Now Michael drove up the hill, and I sat in the back seat. As we neared Dad's place, I gave Aaron's forearm a squeeze. *Don't forget you wanted this.* He looked back at me and smiled, mistaking the gesture for shared excitement.

When we pulled up to the place, the living room curtains were pulled.

I knocked on the door. Aaron and Michael stood behind me. Aaron was whistling quietly. It wasn't any particular song, just a low, tuneless scale.

I was dizzy before I realized that I had drawn in a big breath and was holding it. I breathed out carefully, quietly, and I knocked again, much louder this time.

"Maybe we got the date wrong," Michael offered. By the way he said it, I knew it was for Aaron's benefit. When he glanced at me, I could tell he was irritated, and not just with Dad. He kept scratching his head, pulling at the hair on the nape of his neck. When he looked away, I could see that his scalp was turning red and blotchy.

"We didn't," I replied.

"Maybe he did," Aaron offered.

"He didn't." I looked at him. His hands were in his jacket pockets, and he was looking down. He made a low noise in the back of his throat a couple of times, as though he was about to say something, then looked away, towards the rest of town.

"Well," I said, my voice sounding loud and bossy. "That's that then, isn't it?"

Michael was already half-way to the car. Aaron and I followed.

We left the next morning. We had decided, sitting on Aaron's and my hotel bed the night before, the Kimberley tourist brochures laid out in front of us, to spend the rest of the weekend in Banff instead. Make a vacation of it.

Michael took the first turn driving. I got the back seat again. Aaron started telling a story about visiting his father in London. I had heard this one before, too. After a moment, though, he faltered, fell into silence mid-sentence. Neither Michael nor I prompted him to continue. I looked at my boyfriend in the rear-view mirror. He didn't look back at me. Instead, he watched the pretty, snow-blanketed mountain scenery out his window.

It was late when we got back to the city that Monday. Aaron had taken the last shift driving, and after we dropped Michael off at his place, I couldn't keep my eyes open. Aaron was using my car the next day, so I told him to drop me at a bus stop.

"You don't want to stay?" Aaron asked. Since we had left Kimberley, he had been extra gentle with me. I didn't think I could handle any more of it. I told him I wanted to sleep in my own bed.

I was the only one on the bus, and I sat facing inward, watching the storefronts crawl by. We drew up to the intersection near my apartment, and a boxy red car coming down the other street caught my eye. He had the red light, but I could tell he wasn't going to stop. The bus didn't slow down, and I knew that the driver hadn't seen him. I watched the car glide towards the bus, graceful and unwavering. It was beautiful, strangely beautiful, the way the hulking bus and the boxy little car rolled so evenly for each other. It didn't even occur to me to warn the bus driver. My eyes were locked on the car, and I watched as it drifted past the bus, a hair's width from the bottom of the broad, double windshield. It was so quick, so smooth, I could hardly believe it. The bus driver slammed on the brakes then, and I lurched forward, jamming my shoulder against the hard seat in front of me. His reflex was delayed, irrelevant; the car was already gone. I had watched it slip around the corner—I had watched it disappear, awed that two objects could pass so close together and not meet, not even for a second.

The Genuine Article

Usually when Katie phoned to say she was coming to visit, it was the next day. And before Liz had time to clean properly or plan meals, Katie would be there, catching Liz off guard with a quick, brittle hug, and then, a day or two later, she would whirl off down the road and around the corner as Liz watched, the tips of sentences she had meant to say to her daughter still prickling her tongue. So when Katie called one Sunday night to tell Liz she was coming down the following weekend, Liz panicked. "Why, what's wrong?" She gripped the phone, imagining her son about to be kicked out of university, or her daughter pregnant. "Where's Michael?"

"I don't know, Mom." Katie drew her words out the way she did sometimes, as though her mother were a child or an elderly person. "There's nothing wrong, I just wanted to come and visit. Is that okay?"

"Well—yes. Of course. Yes."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow for supper. And I'm going to bring a friend home with me, okay?"

"Sure," Liz replied, surprised. "Of course."

After she hung up, Liz stood for a long while, staring at the phone. She half imagined that it would ring again, and Katie would tell her she'd changed her mind, she wasn't coming after all, or else that she'd lied, and Michael really was in some sort of

trouble. But the phone didn't ring again, so Liz finally turned away and yanked open the freezer door. She wondered who the friend was; maybe it was Michael, and they just wanted to surprise her. She rummaged around inside until she found a Tupperware single-serving container of spaghetti and sauce she'd frozen the week before. She put it into the microwave to thaw.

The following Friday, she heard her daughter's car up the street, and she knew that the hole in the muffler had got bigger. She pushed the last of the stuffing into the chicken and shoved it into the oven, craning her neck to look out the window. She was at the front door, rubbing at her hands with the dishrag, as Katie pulled into the drive.

"Hi, Mom," Katie said, stretching her legs. "Sorry we're late."

"You're not late. I just put the bird in the oven."

Liz glanced at the figure in the passenger seat, but the reflection of the sun on the windshield made it impossible to see their face. She watched as the car opened, hoping and half-expecting that Michael would appear. But the man who climbed out of Katie's car was not her son. He was tall and handsome and dark-skinned. She had never seen him before. "Well, hello," she said, stupidly staring.

"Mom, this is Aaron."

"Hello," Liz repeated, unable to say anything else.

"It's nice to meet you," Aaron said. He moved gracefully, and his voice had a trace of an accent. His slacks were surprisingly crisp after the three-hour car ride. He stretched a hand out to shake Liz's, and she realized that she was still staring at him. Embarrassed, she rubbed at her oily, garlic-smelling hand with the dishrag she still held.

"Hello, Aaron," Liz said, finding her company voice at last. She liked the way he took her hand, both of his around hers, squeezing slightly before he let go. "Come on into the house. I'll find us something to snack on before dinner." She ran up the stairs ahead of them, trying to think of something nice enough to serve as an appetizer.

Katie and Aaron each carried a suitcase into the house. Liz looked on wordlessly as Katie, after a pause, directed Aaron to Michael's old room, and carried her own bag into her bedroom. Liz sat at the table, relieved. She lit a cigarette, and pushed the ashtray into the centre of the table. She watched Katie go from her own bedroom into the one where she had left her—what? boyfriend? Liz listened to their muffled voices for what seemed like forever.

"Do you smoke?" she asked Aaron as he entered the kitchen.

"No, thank you," he replied, smiling again. He sat across from Liz. Katie came down the hallway. She looked at her mother and their guest, seated together at the table, then quickly glanced away.

"Are you hungry?" Liz asked. "I think I have some carrots. I can make carrot sticks."

"That's okay, Mom," Katie said. "I can get them."

Liz didn't know what to do while she watched her daughter cut up the carrots into uneven little spears. She took long drags from her cigarette, glanced repeatedly at Aaron. He was watching Katie.

"How was the drive?" she asked.

"Not bad," Katie replied. At the same time, Aaron said, "Fine, thank you." Katie and Aaron looked at each other and laughed.

"Aaron doesn't like driving a standard," Katie said. "So I drove, and he slept." She grinned, and Aaron smiled back.

Liz couldn't think of anything to say.

At last, Katie brought the plate of carrot sticks and a little dish of salad dressing to the table. Gratefully, Liz butted the stub her cigarette had become and reached for a carrot. The three of them wolfed down the plate of snacks in a moment, though Liz doubted if Katie and Aaron were any more hungry than she was. They stared for a moment at the empty snack plate, and Liz asked again how the drive was, forgetting that they had already told her.

"It was a nice drive," Aaron said. "Katie's a good driver." He leaned back slightly in his chair and began to tell a story about how Katie had recently driven him to work every morning for over a week when his bicycle was stolen.

Liz watched him as he talked. He was well-spoken, but not in a way that made her feel uncomfortable or conscious of her own words. He was smart, yes, but also relaxed. Easy. Liz looked at Katie, watched her daughter watch Aaron. She couldn't read the expression on Katie's face. She seemed to enjoy Aaron's story, and smiled in all the right places. She looked happy. *Is she in love?* Liz wondered.

Finally, the oven timer rang out, startling them all. Liz caught a little glance as it passed between her daughter and the man named Aaron, too quick for her to interpret. She got up to carve the bird.

Liz remembered a few boys that her daughter had brought home to meet her, back when Katie was still in high school. Since Katie had started university, however, she hadn't

even mentioned any men. Once or twice, she had talked to Liz about friends, all women, and once, when Liz went to visit her in the city, she had met a skinny blonde art student named Janet, who introduced herself as "Katie's university friend."

She had even tried probing Michael.

"If she's seeing anyone, she hasn't told me," he kept telling her.

He mentioned girls. He put one on the phone to say *hi* to Liz, once.

At last, Liz decided that her daughter must be a lesbian. She even started preparing her *I love you no matter what* speech, already building up the tears that she would have to do her best to store away for later, for when she was alone.

And now, here was this man, this strange, polite, graceful man named Aaron who made Katie glow in a soft, happy way that Liz had never seen, not even when Katie was a baby.

Liz had to fight the desire to pull Katie into her bedroom, to hug her and sit her down on Liz's big antique bed, to giggle like they were both sixteen, and to ask her a thousand questions.

"Thank you for a lovely dinner," Aaron said, picking up Liz's empty plate. He stood and reached across the table for Katie's dirty dishes. Liz watched her daughter beam at this strange man whom she'd brought to meet her mother without any explanation. "You don't mind if I do the dishes, do you?"

"No. I don't mind," Liz lied. "Thank you."

"I'm sure you and Katie want to catch up." He smiled at her, his teeth straight and white and too long somehow.

"Thank you," Liz repeated. "Do you want to go and sit out on the patio, Katie?"

"Mom, that's rude," Katie whispered. "I'm not going to leave Aaron to clean up on his own."

Liz widened her eyes at Katie, willed a *mother* look to her features. Katie looked down. "Fine, fine," she said. She followed Liz outside.

They sat in silence for a long while, pulling their jackets close against the spring chill. Liz watched her daughter scratch at the chipping paint on the lawn furniture with her chewed nails. She listened to the clinking of the dishes in the sink, knowing that on this side of the house, the littlest noises would drift down and collect on the patio. She also knew that, by some freak audio-magic trick, you had to shout before someone inside the house could hear you. Liz listened to the swish and clink of Aaron's clean-up, and to his soft, low, intermittent humming. She had so many questions for her daughter that she couldn't sort out what they were, exactly. "Katie," she said at last, and by the nervous little glint in her daughter's eye, she knew that she had said everything she needed to.

"He's a teacher, Mom," Katie said. Her voice was even, rehearsed. "Like you used to be. Except he teaches music. We met a few months ago."

"He has an accent."

"Not much of one. His father's from England."

"And his mother?" Liz knew that she would feel so much better if she could just picture this man's mother.

"She's from Trinidad. Does that bother you?" Katie had that familiar, challenging look on her face. Liz felt relieved. *This, I know*, she thought.

"Of course not," she said. "Don't be silly, Katie."

"You're mad."

"I'm not mad, Katie."

"What are you mad about? I thought you'd like him."

"I'm not mad!" Liz worried that she had shouted, that Aaron might have heard her from the kitchen. They didn't say anything else until Aaron emerged onto the patio.

"I hope you can find everything," he said. He was standing behind Katie's chair, resting his fingers lightly on the tops of her arms, just at the point where the ends of her hair met her skin. Liz watched the tender, easy gesture. "I put things where I thought they should go."

"Thank you," Liz replied automatically. Then they all three hovered until the silence nearly crackled around them.

"Well," Liz said. "I'm awfully tired. Excuse me." She kissed her daughter's cheek as she rose. She paused for a second, resting on the tip of an impulse to kiss Aaron's cheek as well, to squeeze both of his hands in her own. She smiled at him instead. *Make my daughter happy.*

"It was nice to meet you," Aaron said, offering her his bright, long-toothed smile again.

"It was nice to meet you," Liz repeated. "I'll see you in the morning."

As she climbed the stairs to her bedroom, her body felt horribly stiff. She closed the door and sat on her bed for a long time, feeling the cramps in her legs. They started in her feet, like they always did, and worked their way up. She rubbed at the fronts of her thighs, trying to coax them away. Then she rose slowly. *I need a hot bath,* she decided.

She had to remind herself to lock the door—it was so long since she'd needed to. Then she lay in the warm water, a rolled-up hand towel tucked behind her head. She followed the pattern of leaves and flowers on the wallpaper, all the way from the floor to the ceiling. She listened to the motion of other people in the house, imagined that she felt their soft vibrations in the air that was used to only her movements. She imagined that, just from closing her eyes and listening and feeling, she could tell her daughter's motions from the stranger's. And she felt the close, familiar way that they moved around each other. *The air here knows what they're going to do next*, she thought. And she felt foreign—a clumsy, unpredictable object in her own home.

She slipped out of the tub and down the hallway, hearing the crunching of the carpet beneath her feet. Her bathrobe made a muffled flapping noise against the backs of her legs. She checked for the bar of light beneath Michael's bedroom door before knocking softly at Katie's.

"Mom." Katie's voice told Liz that she was not whom her daughter had expected. She was sitting in bed, the blankets pulled over her crossed legs. A novel sat open in her lap. She leaned back against the pillows, drawing her knees up. The book slid down, resting against her stomach.

Liz sat on the edge of the desk. "I like him, Katie."

Katie looked at her mother. Her gaze was doubtful. Liz could see that she wanted to believe her, and she also wanted not to. "I'm glad."

"You could have told me before you came."

"I'm sorry." Not *I know*.

Liz had nothing else to say, but she couldn't say *Good night* either. So instead she continued to sit on the edge of the desk, looking at her daughter, looking at the long, brown hair that looked nothing like her own, at the nose and hands that were all her. She felt like apologizing, but she didn't know what for. So she stood up, ready to go back to bed.

"He wants to move to England," Katie said, without looking up.

"I'm sorry," Liz said and she meant it.

"No—Mom. We're going to get married."

Liz sat back down. "What?" she whispered.

"I don't want to be in school anymore. I just want—to go. So we're going to get married so that I can go with him."

The muscles on either side of Liz's spine tensed up, beginning right above her backside and creeping up towards her neck. "You can't just *go*," she said. She knew she sounded bitter and petulant, and she didn't care. "Katie, listen. Not this. Please, not *this*."

Watching Katie's face turn red was like watching a bottle fill with water. Liz eased her stiff back straight, waiting for the overflow. "Not *him*." Katie's voice was hot and low, and charged like Liz had never heard before. "You mean not *him*."

Liz was unbalanced. "It isn't right," she said, hating the vagueness of her words, but not knowing what to say to show Katie the wrongness of it.

"It's right for me." Katie's words were touched with a dangerous, brittle lightness.

Liz felt suddenly that they must be speaking two different languages, that what her daughter was in fact telling her was that the price of gasoline had gone up again in the city, or that she'd lost her shoes at the gym. She wanted Katie to look up so that she could understand her. *Speak clearly*, she wanted to say. *Enunciate*. "I haven't heard … you say you love him."

"It doesn't have to be like that," Katie said.

"How is it, then?" Liz asked. "What *is* it like?" A headache was creeping its way up behind her eyes. "Where are you getting married?" she asked. "In a church, or in a hall?" and wondered, *Does it matter?*

"Neither, Mom. We thought maybe just a small ceremony in the park. You can come, and Michael, and Aaron's Mom will be there."

"I *can come*?" Liz said in amazement. "I have permission to come to my daughter's wedding?"

"Mom. You don't understand." Katie was almost whispering.

"You're right about that," she said bitterly. "If you want to go to England, why don't you just go? Why all this?"

"It's not that, Mom. Please don't."

"Good night, Katie. We'll talk about this tomorrow."

Back in her own bed, Liz lay on her side, feeling the cramps already crawling through the muscles in her legs. Suddenly, she felt hot all over. *Good God, Katie isn't inviting her father, is she?* She imagined her ex-husband standing opposite her at the wedding, with his frozen-lake stare and long, dangling posture, just like the last time she'd seen him—how many years ago was that?

Liz didn't sleep well that night. Instead, she lay in bed, feeling the air move around her, pushed under her bedroom door by the soft, sleeping breaths of her grown-up daughter and of the stranger who would be her son-in-law.

Once, when she went to the Mac's store near her house to buy milk and cigarettes, Liz got a phoney ten in change. She didn't notice until she got home. Her fingers were raking the coins and fuzz and bits of paper in the bottom of her coat pocket, fishing for her change from the store. The bill caught between her fingers as she pulled out the handful of coins, and she almost threw it away, because it didn't feel like money. She thought it was an old shopping list, or a receipt. Then she glanced at it in her hand, and something about the colour of the bill surprised her, made her roll the crackly-crisp paper between her fingers.

She took it to the RCMP detachment.

"It's counterfeit," the Constable told her. "Prob'ly came from the city. You should check your bills when you get change. One of the most effective tools in counterfeit detection is recognizing the genuine article." His voice smoothed itself over as he recited the last sentence, and his face took on a public-service announcement sheen.

"How?" Liz was surprised. She had never thought of such a thing.

"Here, look," said the Constable, relaxing again as he took a ten out of his wallet. "See the colour? See the fine detail? There's no comparison. And here—these little dots will scratch off genuine currency without tearing the bill." He demonstrated with a key from his pocket. The other keys on the ring jingled as he scratched.

"I'm supposed to do this every time I get change?"

"Well…" The Constable frowned slightly as he eyed the two bills on the counter in front of him. "Here, look. Feel this." He rubbed his thumb over the big *10* on the front of the genuine bill, then held it out for her. "It's a special ink—it's called intaglio. A counterfeit bill will feel smooth all over."

Liz ran her thumb over the bill, feeling the raised bumps and swirls against the lines of her thumbprint. She nodded, relieved.

"Thank you," she said to the Constable.

He kept the bill.

Liz knew Katie would sleep in. And somehow, she also knew that Aaron wouldn't.

She got dressed before she left her bedroom, a thing she couldn't remember ever having done before. She slipped into the bathroom to wash her face and comb her hair. She listened at her daughter's door for a long moment, and she could tell that Katie was still sleeping.

Aaron had made coffee. He stood up and smiled when Liz entered the kitchen. "Good morning," he said, waiting for Liz to sit before he took his own seat.

A gentleman, she thought automatically. She helped herself to a cup of coffee. It was strong, stronger than she usually made it. It felt good in her mouth. "Good morning, Aaron. Sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you." Liz knew he was lying. No one over five foot ten could sleep comfortably in Michael's old bed. And Aaron was six foot, easily.

"Katie gave me some interesting news last night."

"Yes, I thought she might." Aaron sipped his coffee without looking at her. Liz saw that his face was clean and smooth, neatly shaved.

"I was surprised." She rested her cheek against her forearm, her elbow leaning on the table. She had thought this was going to be easier. "Have you told your parents?"

"Not yet." Again, the honey-smooth smile. Polite, yes. But the smile was something more than just manners.

"Are they invited to the wedding?"

"My mother will be there. I thought we would surprise my father with the news when we get to London."

"Is Katie inviting her father?" Liz asked.

"No. I don't think so."

"Thank God for that."

Aaron shifted his coffee back and forth between his palms, his thumbnails clicking against the rim of the cup. These nervous fidgeting hands belonged to someone else. Someone whose back didn't slope over the kitchen counter with a perfect, graceful curve. Someone who didn't greet a stranger in her own kitchen at seven on a Saturday morning as easily as if he were welcoming her into his own home.

From down the hallway, Liz felt, rather than heard, Katie shift and stretch in bed. She dropped her voice. "Aaron," she said. "Please listen. It shouldn't be like *this*. Not for Katie. You have to know that."

He didn't answer. Instead, he drew in a soft, stretched-out breath. His hands drooped softly, cradling the cup as though it was broken and he was trying to keep the liquid inside.

Down the hall, Katie pressed through the heavy air, her feet falling in the sleepy morning patterns that Liz knew so well she could feel them in her mind.

They stayed all weekend. Saturday night, Katie slipped into Michael's room. *Not slipped*, thought Liz as she lay wide awake in her own bed. She knew that she was meant to hear the footsteps along the carpet. Sunday morning, Aaron was up first again. Katie hadn't bothered to *slip* back into her own room.

The three of them chatted with a carefully-maintained friendliness all weekend. Comfort rested flimsily over them. They even played board games on the patio on Sunday, before Aaron started loading up Katie's little car. Liz wondered whether Aaron had a vehicle of his own. Otherwise, why take Katie's beater all the way from the city? He had mentioned a bicycle, hadn't he? Did he pedal all over the city on a bicycle?

They stayed for dinner Sunday night. Liz didn't even have to ask. Afterwards, Aaron and Katie cleaned up, laughing at things that Liz couldn't hear, or didn't understand. She stared at them over a curling strand of cigarette smoke. Since Friday night, she hadn't seen the familiar petulance creep across Katie's face and harden there. She hadn't heard Katie draw out *Mom* until it sounded more like a moan than a name. She searched her mind for the phrases that drew out the fight in her daughter, trying to remember the ones that chafed Katie the most. A part of her wanted to say them, to feel that familiar play between restraint and quick, crackling irritation that usually happened whenever they were together. *Does Aaron know that voice?* she wondered. She imagined it twisting his syllables in the same way. *Aa-ron.*

As Liz watched them more closely, though, she could see that the fluidity in Aaron's limbs as he leaned down to kiss Katie, or to avoid her playful slaps, had congealed. He seemed more guarded, somehow, more calculating. Once, he caught Liz's gaze and looked down. An almost-blush touched his freshly shaved cheeks.

After Sunday night supper, Katie and Aaron finally piled into her car and left for home. As soon as the noise of the muffler had disappeared, Liz felt the air of the house around her settle, almost with a sigh. Other bodies were a strain on its stillness. It tolerated more easily the chatter and sloshed coffee of her friends, mostly retired teachers like herself.

Liz thought for a moment that she was going to scream. Instead, she went inside to sit at the kitchen counter and smoke.

She waited ages to be invited to Katie's and Aaron's little wedding. She telephoned Michael twice a week to make sure that Katie hadn't changed her mind about inviting her mother. She dug through the boxes in Michael's closet until she found his old atlas, and flipped through until she found a map of Northern South America and the Caribbean, and ran her thumb across the page until she found the little bumps labelled *Trinidad and Tobago*. Finally, she called Katie to ask her herself.

Her hands were shaking and she had to dial three times. She and Katie had spoken on the phone since, yes, but there had been no mention of a wedding. Each time they spoke, they waltzed deftly around the subject, even when one or the other would mention Aaron.

This time, though, Liz had steeled herself. *When are you getting married, Katie?* she would ask. Instead, she blurted, "Katie, do you check your bills when you get change?"

"Do I what?"

"Do you check your bills? I don't think I told you about the time I got a counterfeit ten, but the RCMP constable told me that you should always check your change. For fake bills."

"No, Mom, I don't check my change."

"Katie," Liz began, feeling those stored-up tears leaking from her eyes. "I'm okay, it's okay," she sniffled. "Everything is okay."

"Mom, I'm not getting married," Katie said.

Liz stopped crying. "I'm sorry," she said. And she was. She was relieved, and she was sorry.

Katie didn't answer.

That summer, Liz drove to the city to watch her daughter convocate from university. She sat next to her son, clapping until her palms hurt when Katie walked out to shake hands with a row of robed luminaries.

"What's she going to do with a degree in History and French?" Michael whispered. Liz shushed him. She gazed at her daughter's back, at the black mortarboard that prevented her from getting a glimpse of her daughter's face.

Afterwards, Liz took her kids out to dinner. "To celebrate," she said proudly, snapping one last picture of Katie in her cap and gown. "I'm so glad you decided to stick

with it, Katie." Then she fell silent, because she knew that they were both thinking of Aaron. Katie had phoned to tell her when he'd left for London.

Katie suggested a restaurant just off the university campus. It was a trendy little place with a deliberately shabby décor. It seemed to suit Katie, but Liz felt out of place.

Liz sat silently for a while, listening to Michael rib his sister about her Arts degree. "Want some fries with that BA?" he asked. Katie laughed.

"Well, what now?" Liz asked. "Grad school, maybe?"

"No, I don't think so," replied Katie, poking at her salad. "One degree is enough for me, thank you."

"Are you going to start working right away? Have you decided where?"

"I have. Sort of." Katie kept her eyes down. Baffled, Liz looked at Michael, and she realized that he was avoiding her gaze, too. *What's going on here?*

"Katie," she said sharply. "Katie. What do you mean?"

Katie chewed carefully, then swallowed a slow gulp of water before she answered. "I've booked my ticket to England," she said finally. "I'm leaving at the end of the month."

Liz couldn't breathe. She looked again at Michael. He glanced up at his mother and blushed. *How could he not say something to me?* Liz wondered, staring at him. "You told me you weren't getting married," she said. Her gaze stayed on Michael's face. She knew that if she looked at her daughter, she would start crying.

"I'm not. Aaron—we decided not to get married. But I got a visa. I've got a job in a library waiting for me. I'm still going."

"Why?"

"Because I want to. Because I don't want to be here any more."

"Because Aaron is there." Liz's voice had risen. She felt the other restaurant patrons glancing at them, and she didn't care.

"That's partly it," Katie said. Her voice was so low, Liz wondered whether she'd heard or lip-read.

"What about us?" Liz said, staring hard at Michael. "We're here."

"I know you are," Katie said. And she wouldn't say anything else.

At the end of the month, Liz went back to the city to help Katie pack up her things. Katie hadn't asked her to, but Liz knew she was expecting her anyway. They sat on the carpet in Katie's living room, sorting Katie's possessions into four piles: one for Michael, one to go into storage in Liz's house, one that Katie would take with her, and one that Liz would drop off at the Goodwill.

"What about these dishes?" Liz asked. "They're chipped."

"Michael wants them," Katie replied. Her hair was tied back under a bandanna, and she was wearing a pair of ripped pyjamas. She looked like she needed a shower.

That afternoon, as Katie packed her suitcases, Liz shuttled the boxes around the city, then returned to Katie's apartment with Michael. The three of them sat on the carpet, eating pizza.

"We still need to clean," Liz said, dabbing at a spot of grease on the carpet with her paper napkin. "Does your apartment manager have a steam cleaner?"

"I'm not going to clean," Katie replied. "I'll just let them take it out of my damage deposit."

Liz frowned. "That's not very sensible," she said. "Let me come back after I drop you off at the airport. I'll clean."

"It's okay, Mom. It's easier just to let them do it."

"Katie."

"Please Mom," Katie said, looking up from her pizza. "Just let's do it my way, okay?"

Liz didn't reply. They finished their supper, and loaded up Katie's car. "All yours," she grinned, handing Michael the keys.

"Are you serious?" he asked, looking back and forth between his sister and his mother.

"Just until I get back."

Liz's eyes filled with tears.

Even Michael cried at the airport. He and Liz took turns hugging Katie at the security gate, as the guards looked on blandly. Finally, Katie slipped through the metal detector and out of sight. Michael took Liz's arm.

"Let's go back to Katie's place," Liz said, wiping at her eyes with a Kleenex. "We can stop at the manager's suite on our way up. We'll ask if he has a vacuum and a steam cleaner we could borrow."

Of All the Places in the World

I never would have thought of leaving Canada if it weren't for Aaron. Leaving Edmonton, yes. That, I would have done on my own. I could have taken my Bachelor of Arts degree to Vancouver or Toronto and been another secretary in another city already brimful of over-educated secretaries, or I could go with him.

"I don't want to go without you," he said to me.

"What would I do in England?" I asked him.

"What are you doing here?"

It was a good point.

Before I left to live with Aaron in his London flat, I had a key cut for him for my Edmonton apartment. But I couldn't get him a key for the front door, and a few times he tried to surprise me, or he came by before I got home, and he had to buzz my crazy next door neighbour to get into the building. He told me that she would always wait for him in the hall, her apartment door slightly open. She wanted to talk to him about England. She said she could tell from his voice that he was English.

"Offered me tea," he told me. I listened, but the edges of his accent were usually so smoothed over I couldn't believe that Miss Mundy could pick them out over the intercom. "I declined, of course."

"I hope so." I was irritated that she would ambush my boyfriend in the hallway like that.

"Are you jealous?" he joked, drawing his thick biceps over my collarbones, pulling me into a backwards hug. The top of my head fit just below his chin, and even though he was behind me, I could feel his grace and steadiness.

"Of course not. Ick—Can you imagine her apartment? Not in a million." My mom had been to Miss Mundy's a couple of times. She'd told me enough about the place that I could picture a hospital green kitchen cupboard door, dirty cushion covers, grimy teapot, snagged old bathrobe slightly open, offering the kinds of little glimpses you can't avoid.

I was nervous in those days when he first had a key to my place. I hid tampons behind stacked rolls of toilet paper under the bathroom counter. I poured out the dregs of old bottles of cheap liquor, mostly leftovers from parties past. I started wearing makeup after my evening bath, and I threw out my granny underwear. One weekend, I got sick with the flu, and Aaron insisted on coming over to take care of me.

"Please go home," I begged. "I don't want you to get sick."

"I don't care," he said, kissing my clammy forehead. "I want to take care of you."

"I don't need you to." I did not want him to watch me throw up. He'd never been seriously sick since I'd met him, but I already knew that I would never watch him throw up. He would never let me. He's good at keeping things like that out of sight.

"I know," he said, and stayed.

I waited for him to go out to rent movies before I ran myself a bath. I had the chills, and my stomach was cramping like my period was about to start, and I wanted

more than anything to stew my quaking body in hot water. I lay in the bathtub and stared at the ceiling above me. The heat was easing the cramps in my muscles. I sucked in the steamy air and wished away the achy pain at the base of my skull.

The heat had just gone out of the water when I heard the apartment door open and close. I rubbed my face with a washcloth, then sat up. On the bottom of the tub, just between my legs, was a clotty little spot of blood. As I stared at it, I heard Aaron moving around in my apartment. Suddenly panicky, I pulled the plug. I stood up, fighting the thudding in my head, and turned on the shower, swishing the little spot of blood down the drain with my feet, terrified that Aaron would walk into the bathroom and see it.

That evening, as I lay on the living room couch watching TV, a heating pad tucked under my lower back, Aaron first told me about his plan to move to England.

"There are no teaching jobs here," he said. "Especially not for music teachers. My dad's found something for me just outside of London. Why don't we go?"

I closed my eyes. "I can't think about this right now," I told him. "I have a headache."

Aaron kissed me on the forehead and reached for the bottle of aspirin that he'd put on the table earlier that day. He picked up my left hand, holding it between his finger and his thumb, and shook the pills into my palm. Three pills fell out. "Not that many," he said, releasing my hand to drop one back into the bottle. Then he pressed my fingers closed as he reached for my orange juice. He was so gentle, I could have cried.

The night before Aaron left for London, we sat in my apartment, surrounded by his clothes. He had already sent some of his things off to his father, and sold most of his

furniture. We were sorting through what clothing he wanted to take with him, and what I would drop off at Goodwill the next day.

Aaron had been living with me at my place for over a week. He had already let his place go, but his flight wasn't until the middle of the month. He wasn't working, and he got up every morning to make me breakfast. He was a good cook. That week, he made a lot of muffins, and froze the leftovers for me to eat after he'd gone.

"That's something my mom would do," I said the first time he did it.

As we sat and sorted through shirts and pants and socks, Aaron talked about going to visit his mother's family in Trinidad when he was little. I had heard some of the story before, but I didn't stop him.

"What was England like, visiting your father?" I asked, when he finished.

Aaron frowned slightly. "Different," he said, tossing an odd sock into the trash can. "It never felt as much like a holiday, going to England. It felt more normal. That's why I could never go and live in Trinidad."

"Because it isn't normal?"

"No, I suppose it's normal for my mother and my aunts and uncles. My cousins all live there, and we used to spend the whole summer together. And we always had so much fun, my mother and I. In England, it was always just my Dad and me, and sometimes his adult friends. He's like me, an only child. Going to England was a trip, a visit with my father. Trinidad was more like a holiday. It was harder to leave, but easier to come home after being there. It's not a place I could just settle down and live. Can you understand that?"

I remembered visiting my father when I was little, the way he offered us things to make the trips to his various houses seem fun. Coal oil lamps, like we were camping. A pony to ride. "Yeah," I said to Aaron. "I can."

That July, I got my mom and my brother to come with me to the airport. We were all quiet the whole drive out there. Mom sat in the passenger seat, sniffling every now and then, and Michael stretched out his legs on the back seat. I didn't say anything, because I'd already told him he could have the car. Let him deal with mud on the upholstery.

As I parked the car, Mom asked me, "Did you tell your father you were going?"

"No," I said. "I think he moved again. I don't have his phone number this time."

"You should have gotten hold of him," Mom said. "He might have sent you money for the trip."

"Do you think he would?" Michael asked.

"Probably," Mom replied, getting out. "If Katie had asked."

I didn't know what to say. Dad hadn't so much as sent us birthday or Christmas cards in years. It had never occurred to me to ask.

They hugged me goodbye just outside the security checkpoint, and we all cried. At the last minute, Mom rummaged through her purse and handed me a package of pretty flowered writing paper. I was surprised; I couldn't imagine her buying anything so fancy.

"I want to know everything," she said, hugging me so hard I could barely breathe.

"Okay," I said, and kissed her cheek quickly, as the security guard waved me through.

I couldn't find Aaron at first, at Heathrow. I had been off the plane only a few minutes, and already I could feel the cold creeping through my clothes, a dampness that clung to me like honey, or spider webs. As I hauled my over-packed suitcases through the airport, I watched faces, hoping to see Aaron's. I could tell just from looking at people that they weren't Canadian. Clipped accents and foreign languages buzzed past me. The thick £ symbol in the windows of the duty free shops caught me by surprise, made me stare hard as I tried to interpret the price tags. And the building smelled strangely old. It made me crave the antiseptic cleanliness of office buildings and airports back home. Panic crept its way up from my throat, settling in tears just behind my eyelids. I sat down on a hard plastic bench and looked up at the ceiling, blinking quickly.

Someone sat down next to me. I knew, without looking, that it was Aaron. I turned my head, grateful for his familiar face, glad that he hadn't changed his hair or grown a beard since I'd last seen him. I slumped against him, relieved. He leaned over and kissed the top of my head.

"I've missed you," he said. I nodded to tell him that I had missed him, too. He picked up my suitcases and carried them out to a waiting cab. He held the door open for me as the cabbie loaded my bags. I settled into the back seat and tried to subdue the panic that prickled my throat and my eyelids. I didn't say anything until after the cabbie pulled away from the curb.

"I don't like it." My voice was squeaky and petulant, but I didn't care. I breathed in his rich, sweet scent, like vanilla and sandalwood. "I don't want to stay."

He drew his arm around me. "Okay," he said, sounding to my ears more Canadian than he had ever sounded at home. "We'll give it a chance, and then if you still don't like it, we'll go."

I could tell he was disappointed in me, and I loved him for not saying so. I nodded and pressed myself against him, wishing I could just disappear into his warm body.

We stayed in London just over a month. I hardly left his flat. The closeness of the buildings, the narrow sidewalks, the smallness of the shops along our street, all made me feel crushed. I missed seeing empty lots, and streets with wide shoulders. The dampness in the air seeped into my clothes. I was cold all the time.

"It's not normally this chilly in the summer," Aaron told me, his face flushed with apology. "When it stops raining you'll see how nice it can be." He pulled a blanket over my shoulders and kissed me on the mouth.

I was bored, restless. Aaron didn't have a TV, and I didn't like reading because I could feel the dampness in the pages of my books. Their spines didn't crackle anymore when I opened them, they just sagged and yawned, offering their moistness to my reluctant fingers. So I slept instead, pulling the warm, rustling duvet over my head.

The first week I was in London, Aaron's dad took us out for lunch. He was taller than Aaron, and his skin was translucently pale under his limp, dark hair. He was thin, and he moved like a top-heavy sunflower in the wind. He and his son shared a lot of the same graceful gestures, but on Aaron's father, they seemed put-on, unnatural. He reached out to shake my hand, clasping mine in both of his. When Aaron did that, it was

a quick, firm motion. He made you feel that if you didn't squeeze back, your fingers might be crushed. His father's hands barely touched mine, but his arms seemed to move too wide, too slowly as he reached out, and then again after he let go. And except for the sharpness of his jaw and the way his chin jutted out beneath his lip, he looked nothing like Aaron. His eyes were bland, offering no clues to his mood. I could never have picked him out as my boyfriend's father.

I had always liked letting Aaron order for both of us when we ate out. He spoke to waitresses with an ease and a confidence that made them smile shyly at him. We sometimes got a second dessert that never appeared on the bill. But when his father ordered for all three of us, I was the one who blushed. He insisted on pronouncing the French words in a flowery, awkward accent, and he touched the waitress's hand limply as he handed back the menus. I watched her recoil.

He called me Katharine. "I hear you're a librarian, Katharine," he said. His voice had the same fluid warmth as Aaron's, but the corners of his accent were sharp, where Aaron's voice vacillated between Englishness and Canadianness.

"Actually, I don't think we'll stay long enough for that." My eyes were on Aaron, who was staring out at the street.

"I hadn't heard," Aaron's father said, his eyes going to Aaron. They were both quiet after that. Following lunch, he clasped Aaron's hand, and pulled his elbow in with his other hand, a sort of handshake-hug hybrid. He looked at me for the briefest moment, as though trying to determine what to do with me. Finally, his hands on my shoulders, he brushed each of my cheeks with his, making a faint kissing noise on each side. "Well,

then," he said by way of goodbye. Aaron half-smiled and nodded before he slipped his fingers between mine, squeezing my hand to tell me it was time to go.

The next day, Aaron called the library where I was supposed to work and told them that we'd had a change in plans, that we would be leaving too soon for me to start there. I sat next to him on the couch, listening to the faint female voice on the phone, not quite able to catch her words.

"Were they mad?" I asked, picking at a ball of lint on his sleeve. I don't know how, but his sweaters never felt damp, the way mine did.

"Doesn't matter, does it?" He sounded weary, but when I looked at him, he was smiling a little, as though it were funny, him calling to quit for me.

"No," I lied. "Can we go to France?"

He was surprised. He pulled away from me a little, his hand still resting on my leg. "I thought you wanted to go home."

"I never said that."

I started writing letters to schools and libraries and newspapers all over France. Once a week, I would pull on a sweater over a long-sleeved top and walk, shivering, to the library up the block. I would search the Internet for anyone I thought might hire a Canadian university graduate and a music teacher with dual Canadian and British citizenship. And I would almost run home, my bag pressed against my leg, to enter names and addresses into the form letter that I'd saved on my laptop. At night, when Aaron got home from teaching, I would hand him letters to sign, and then I would seal them in envelopes and tuck them into his bag for him to mail the next day, before he left for work.

It didn't take long for a private school in Vichy to offer us both teaching jobs: music for Aaron, and English for me.

Aaron clicked his thumbnail across his front teeth when I showed him the letters. He was sitting at the kitchen table, going over his lesson for the next day. "Do you think that's a good idea? To work together all day, then to come home and spend all evening together?"

"We'll be on different campuses," I replied, showing him the letter. "We won't really be working together."

He took the letter out of my hand and pulled me to him, pressing his face to my chest. I pushed my fingers into his hair, breathing in the clean smell of his shirt.

Even at Roissy, I could feel the friendliness of the France air. It was still damp, compared to the flat dryness of Edmonton, yes, but the moisture wasn't invasive, cloying. I hugged Aaron.

"Here we are." He tucked his hand into the back pocket of my jeans, squeezing my backside slightly.

Where the narrowness of English streets and the sharp stinginess of English sidewalks had seemed constricted, French streets were slender, the close buildings cradling, not claustrophobic.

One afternoon, when Aaron was out picking up supper for both of us from the McDonald's on the Avenue Clemenceau, I sat down on the hotel bed and called my mom.

"In France?" she repeated, sounding dazed. "You're in France?"

"I didn't like London," I explained, already feeling foolish. I waited for the rebuke.

"Why didn't you write me?" Mom sounded small and hurt. All of a sudden, I felt guilty.

"I didn't want to tell you I wasn't happy. I wanted to wait until I was somewhere I liked."

"Is Aaron with you?"

"Of course."

There was a long pause. "Write me a letter, okay?" she said at last.

"I will," I said. "I promise."

"Katie," Mom said just as I was about to hang up. "Was it really your idea to go to France?"

"Yeah," I replied, puzzled. "It was."

"Okay, then. I love you."

We'd been in France just over a week when I found us a little house in a village above Vichy. The rent was cheap, because the place was removed from the shops and bus routes of the village, but I had bought a used car outside of Paris with most of the money I'd saved back home. Aaron and I had been staying in a dirty and expensive hotel in town, and we were ready to settle down just about anywhere. I didn't expect to be so charmed by the place. Everything about it, from the woven-bottomed dining room chairs to the shuttered windows, felt remarkably, endearingly French. Aaron and I stood on the tiled kitchen floor, staring out the window, past the laurel hedge, to the sheep grazing in the field below.

"Do you like it?" I asked.

Aaron rested his hands loosely on my waist. "I like it. Do you like it?"

I closed my eyes. "Of all the places in the world," I said, turning around and kissing him, my tongue meeting his, "I couldn't be happier than I am right here."

It was late summer when we arrived in France, and I had a couple of weeks before I had to start working. Aaron meticulously unpacked his few boxes, arranging the house to suit us. I started taking long walks in the lush, sweet-smelling forests. I loved the way they embraced the little trails that crossed through them, and broke suddenly to reveal farms and villages. They seemed not to know their dark Northern Albertan cousins, which stretched jealously for miles and miles, forever sometimes. But they knew me. I felt welcome there.

Aaron didn't much like hiking. He had a bad knee, he said, and he preferred swimming. I was surprised. He had never mentioned any leg injuries to me before.

Often, when I left for an afternoon hike up the round-topped little mountain behind our house, he would climb into our second-hand Volkswagen and drive to the swimming pool in Vichy.

"I'll see you in a couple of hours," he said one afternoon. "Unless you feel like joining me."

I looked out the window at the enticing greenness. Soon we would both be working, and my afternoon hikes would all but stop. "I don't much like swimming," I said.

He kissed quickly, just missing my mouth. "Thanks anyway," I called to his retreating figure. I don't think he heard me.

Once school started, I dropped Aaron off at the *collège* every morning, before continuing on to the *lycée*, where I was teaching for the first time in my life. We kissed each other goodbye in the car, and then, at five, I picked him up again for a *hello* peck on the mouth.

"Let's go travelling," Aaron said one afternoon, as we drove up the long drive to our house. "Let's go to Germany for the November break. Italy over Christmas, maybe. What do you think?"

I laughed. "We just got here," I said. "Why not see some more of France, first?"

He shrugged and stared out the window. "If that's what you want," he said.

Our first days in France, we had practised our French with each other, breaking into giggles as we caught our mistakes. Later, when our French was spent on the French, fumbling for words with each other seemed less funny. We felt depleted, our minds and our mouths exhausted by the effort of curling our tongues around the unfamiliar syllables. So the drive home from work was usually quiet. At first, we would ask, *How was your day?* Soon, though, we knew to expect *Fine, thanks, how was yours?* I caught on to the French more quickly than Aaron did. For a while, I tried to keep practising it with him on the way. *Que veux-tu manger ce soir? Comment ça va au boulot?* English words had begun to feel strange in my mouth, and it was stranger still to share my accented, imperfect French with him. He would answer me in clipped English monosyllables, sometimes sounding irritated, sometimes exhausted. It was so much easier to drive quietly, listing to the mix of English, French and Spanish songs on the car radio.

I saved my English for long letters to my mom. I didn't tell her about things that Aaron and I did, or about my job, or about the people I met. Instead, I described

everything—our house, the green forests, the narrow sidewalks, the buildings, the parks. My bulging envelopes surprised me. I had never been much of a letter writer before.

For Aaron and me, though, French and English both gave way to silence. It was a creeping kind of silence, like the creeping wet-cold of England. Pretty soon, it had leached its way into both of us.

I'm surprised now that we could breathe, with so much silence dulling the air in that house. It sat heavily between us, and we moved through it, gathering it close, careful not to snag its hems with our heels. It was the most polite kind of silence we could conjure. We said *Good morning*, asked *How was your day?* even said *Good night, I love you.* But that seemed to be all we could manage. We still held hands when we went walking in town, and draped our limbs over each other at night. And when our hands and our mouths found each other, it was always in silence, always in the dark.

That fall, I had got to know some of the teachers that I worked with. I liked them. We would often sit in one of the little pubs just off the *Place de la Poste* before going home to a late-evening French meal. Those days, I would call Aaron, and he would walk from the *collège* to pick up the car and drive up to our little rented house alone. I would follow later, dropped off by one of my new French friends. And then I would sit down and describe them for Mom.

She called once, and I tried to tell her that Aaron and I couldn't seem to talk to each other anymore. But the only words I could find were, "It's so quiet here, Mom."

"Sounds nice," she said dreamily.

I told her it *was* nice.

The evenings I stayed home, Aaron and I watched TV together, went to movies or dinner sometimes, cultivating a crushing polite silence that slowly overruled hand-holding and kisses, that eventually drew a forbidding line down the centre of our bed. And we both knew that I could wipe it away, like steam on our bathroom mirror in the morning, and we both knew that I wouldn't.

It was nearly Christmas before either of us could bear to meet it head-on. Aaron had draped strands of lights over the windows—on the inside of the house, so that they wouldn't get caught in the shutters. One evening, we were sitting in our little French house, bathed in the faint red and gold glow of the Christmas lights. We had finished eating dinner, and neither of us had said anything since we'd stopped eating. We were sipping on a slightly vinegary regional red.

"I love you," I told him without hardness, "but I don't want to live with you." I had ruled out *can't live with you*, knowing that it wasn't true. I could see us ten, fifty years later, still in the same house or one like it, perhaps no longer holding hands at parties, but still folding familiar limbs into accustomed curves of each other's bodies each night, becoming to each other like the dents in the cushions of favourite chairs. I knew that these things could easily come to be, and I fought them like I fought the lines that had started to form at the corners of my eyes, with magic potions and angry defiance.

Aaron didn't answer. He drew in a tired sigh. I wished I could see his face more clearly, but the red-and-gold glow revealed only the contour of his chin, a warm darkness to his skin, and deep black hollows where his eyes were. I noticed that his stiffly leaning posture hardly changed in his chair. I called one of my teacher friends from school and asked her if she wanted to go for a drink in town.

Aaron was awake when I got home that night. I kissed his mouth hard, knowing that I tasted of stale wine. He kissed me back, pushing my shirt up, off my back and over my head. I dug my fingers hard into his hair, and pushed his face into my chest. His mouth felt hot on my night-cooled skin. I pushed against him, my hip bone digging into his. His hands pressed hard against my back, then slid down across my hips, between my legs. I came, then I let him pull me forward, on top of him, and when he released me, I slid over to my side of the bed, my fingers just grazing his thigh. I realized that neither of us had said a word.

"Your mother called," he said into the darkness.

"Okay."

"What was your father like?" he asked suddenly.

"Why? I asked, suspicious. "Did she say something about him?"

"No," he said. I could tell he was lying.

"I'm going home," Aaron said the following night as he made supper. He was frying onions in a pan, and their sweetness clung to the air. He was making liver and onions, which I hated. I was curled up in an armchair just off the kitchen, reading a book I'd assigned to one of my classes. "You can come with me, or you can stay."

I didn't say anything for a moment. I could hear him breathing, and my own breath sounded unusually loud in the little house. We were both drawing the thick, oniony air slowly in and out of our lungs, and I knew that he was trying not to sound unsettled. "Home where?" I asked. "When?"

"Edmonton. Next month."

My chest loosened. "Okay," I said. "I'll think about it."

"Katie," he called behind me as I climbed the stairs to our room. "It's cold here. It's as cold here as it was in London."

I didn't answer him.

One afternoon, I sat in a classroom long after all the students had gone home for the day. I could see my car parked across from the school. I sat at the window, watching the street until Aaron appeared between the buildings. He walked slowly up to the car, looking up and down the street. He stared at the front of the *lycée* for a long moment, leaning his thigh against the hood. Finally, he dug in his pocket for the keys and unlocked the driver's door. I watched him ease down the narrow, car-lined street.

I went to the post office and bought a phone card. There was a pay phone outside the building.

"Why are you phoning?" my mom asked. "It's so expensive. And I love getting your letters."

"You never write back." I felt like I was going to cry. I turned my body so nobody could see my face.

"Nothing changes here," she said. "What would I write?"

"I don't know." I took a deep breath to keep my voice from shaking. "Anything." I wanted to ask her to describe my old bedroom, to write down the exact colour of the living room carpet, to tell me what the wide, round-edged sidewalks looked like. "Just write anything."

"Oh, Katie." Mom sighed my name, drawing out the *a*. "You're homesick."

I pushed my thumb along my lower lashes, rubbing away the beginnings of tears. "Yeah," I lied. "I am."

I had dinner alone in a Moroccan restaurant along the river. Then I walked as far as I could towards home. I used the last few minutes on my phone card to call a cab from a pharmacy on the edge of Vichy.

The house was silent, lit faintly by the porch light, which Aaron had left on for me. I took my shoes off at the door, a Canadian habit that I never could break, and shuffled down the darkened hallway to the bedroom. Aaron was in bed asleep, curled up on his side—so polite, so considerate, even in his sleep. I stripped down to my panties and curled up next to him, my skin opening up to the stillness of his sleeping form. Without waking, he dropped his arm around my waist, fitting it in above my hip bone. I wished I could curl right into him, and as I lay there breathing his warm scent and the friendly French air around us, I knew that no place in the world would ever be so good, or so safe.